# The Marshmallow Balloon

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In Candy Village, where the streets smell of honey and the lampposts are striped like candy canes, lived three friends. Pippa had mint-green curls, sky-blue overalls, and a red ribbon that always came untied. Toby wore a green knitted vest and kept a coil of rope on his belt, just in case. Little Lulu, the smallest of the three, wore a yellow raincoat and round goggles pushed up on her forehead.

Every year the village held a Float Festival. This year the prize was a balloon as big as a house, puffed from whipped marshmallow and tied with a long, twisty rope. Pippa ran to touch it first, her amber eyes wide. 'It looks like a giant cloud!' she said. Toby shook his head. 'It looks like a lot of work,' he said, checking the knots. Lulu giggled.

'Just one little tug,' Pippa whispered. She reached for the rope and gave it a playful pull. The knot slipped. The marshmallow balloon wobbled, swelled, and lifted. 'Oh no!' squeaked Pippa as her feet left the ground. Toby grabbed her hand, and Lulu grabbed Toby's belt, and up, up went all three of them into the bright blue sky.

The basket beneath the balloon was made of woven licorice, and it swayed like a swing. Pippa held tight to the rim. 'I didn't mean to!' she cried. Toby took a deep breath and counted the rope coils on his belt. 'Nobody is hurt,' he said. 'Now we think.' Lulu climbed onto Toby's shoulders and looked over the edge.

Below them, Candy Village grew smaller and smaller, until the roofs looked like little gumdrops. 'We have no map,' said Lulu, her violet eyes scanning the sky. 'And no plan,' said Toby. Pippa's cheeks went pink. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I was too excited to think.' Toby patted her shoulder. 'Then we make a plan now,' he said.

They floated up past fluffy sugar clouds. The clouds were soft as cotton and tasted faintly sweet when Lulu poked one. 'They're beautiful,' she whispered. But the balloon kept rising. Toby pulled a stub of pencil from his pocket. 'We need to go down, not up,' he said, drawing a wobbly arrow. 'Does anyone know how a balloon comes back down?' Pippa and Lulu looked at each other.

Just then, a swirl of cool air hit the basket. It smelled sharp and minty. 'Peppermint wind!' shouted Lulu, her braids flying. The balloon spun sideways, and the basket tipped. Pippa held Lulu's raincoat, and Toby held Pippa's satchel strap. The wind whistled past, and the marshmallow balloon bounced like a ball. 'Hold on!' called Toby, but his voice blew away.

When the spinning stopped, they were far from Candy Village. Below them spread fields of striped candy corn and a river of fizzy soda. 'We have to steer,' said Toby. 'Balloons don't have wheels.' Pippa looked at the sail-like hood of Lulu's yellow raincoat. 'But we have a sail!' she said. 'If we open it wide, maybe the wind will push us home.'

Lulu climbed to the front of the basket and spread her raincoat hood like a little sail. The peppermint wind caught it, and the balloon turned. 'It works!' she cheered. But then the wind changed again, and the balloon dipped low over a hill of chocolate rocks. Toby threw out his rope to steady them. 'We need to aim, not just drift!' he said.

The wind blew harder, and the balloon bumped across a sugar cloud, leaving a trail of white puffs. Pippa felt her tummy flip. 'I'm scared,' she said quietly. Toby put an arm around her. 'Me too,' he said. 'But we're together, and that's a good start.' Lulu pointed. 'Look! The soda river bends toward home!' she said.

Toby uncoiled his rope and tied it to the basket's edge. 'When we float over the river, we can let the rope drag in the water,' he said. 'That will slow us down.' Pippa tied her red ribbon to the rope so they could see it. Lulu held her raincoat sail steady. 'Ready?' asked Toby. 'Ready!' said Pippa and Lulu together.

The marshmallow balloon drifted toward the soda river. The rope splashed in, and the basket slowed with a gentle tug. 'It's working!' cried Pippa. The peppermint wind softened to a breeze. Toby pulled the rope hand over hand, steering them along the riverbank. 'Candy Village is just past those gumdrop hills,' he said. Lulu's goggles caught the sunlight as she smiled.

Down, down floated the marshmallow balloon, past the gumdrop hills and the candy-cane lampposts. Villagers ran out with ropes and waved their hats. The balloon settled onto the village green with a soft, squishy bounce. Pippa jumped out first. 'We made it!' she shouted, her red ribbon fluttering behind her.

The mayor hurried over. 'That was a bumpy adventure!' she said. Toby showed her his pencil marks and the rope. 'Next time we'll pack a map,' he said. Pippa nodded. 'And we'll check the knots before we tug them.' Lulu held up her raincoat. 'And we'll bring a sail!' Everyone laughed, and the marshmallow balloon gave a happy little wobble.

That evening the three friends sat by the lampposts eating warm sugar buns. 'Big adventures need good preparation,' said Toby. Pippa tied her ribbon in a proper bow. 'And good friends,' she added. Lulu raised her cocoa. 'And a little clever thinking,' she said. They clinked their cups and watched the stars twinkle like sugar grains.

The marshmallow balloon stayed tied to the village green, ready for another day. Pippa, Toby, and Lulu made a list of things to bring: a map, ropes, snacks, and a big sail. 'Where should we go next?' asked Pippa. Toby grinned. 'Somewhere sweet,' he said. Lulu pulled down her goggles. 'But first,' she said, 'we plan.' And that is exactly what they did.