THE MAGIC FARAWAY TREE

A CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE

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CHAPTER ONE

'WE WISH you a merry Christmas!' Milo sang.

'We *wish* you a merry *Christmas*!' Mia sang.

'We wish you a merry Christmas!' Birdy sang at the top of her voice.

'And a happy New Year!' they sang together, and then they started all over again.

'Please! No more! That's the tenth time!' Mum protested.

'How am I supposed to concentrate on my driving with you lot bellowing Christmas carols?' Dad said.

Their parents weren't really cross though. Everyone was in a happy holiday mood.

'Just one more time!' Birdy begged.

Mum and Dad joined in *several* more times before they saw the sign to the motorway services and turned off to park there. It took a while to find a space because so many people were travelling to spend Christmas with their family or friends. When they climbed out of the car, at last, they heard familiar music.

'We wish you a merry Christmas!' A group of carol singers were standing outside the entrance in woollen hats and thick coats, singing away.

'Let's go and sing with them!' said Birdy.

'We can't do that, silly!' said Milo.

'People would think we were showing off,' said Mia, tutting at their little sister.

'I *like* showing off!' said Birdy, and she ran to join the carol singers before they could stop her.

She smiled at them and joined in the chorus, singing heartily. Birdy wasn't worried when they started singing the verse. She didn't know the words, but she just went la-la-la, more or less keeping in tune. The carol singers didn't seem to


Carols
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Carols

mind. They were all looking at her, smiling. Other people were smiling too, and saying she was sweet, and a little pet.

'Mum, Dad, *stop* her!' said Milo, going red.

'She's hopeless!' said Mia, rolling her eyes.

'But she *is* sweet and nobody seems to mind,' said Dad. He always said he didn't have any favourites – but if he *did* they were sure it would be Birdy.

'Still, I think she's had her little moment,' said Mum. She went over and took hold of Birdy's hand. 'Come on, pet.'

Birdy smiled at everyone and waved her free hand. They all went, 'Aaaah!'

Milo and Mia sighed. They loved their younger sister, but she could be a royal pain at times.

They were playing more Christmas songs inside the cafe. Birdy started to sing along again, but Mum shook her head.

'I think that's enough now,' she said. 'Come on, what do we all want to eat? I'm going to have one of those rainbow salads.'

'Well, I'm going to have fish and chips,' said Dad.

'Fried chicken, chicken, chicken!' said Milo.

'I'd like a veggie burger please,' said Mia.

'I'd like a doughnut!' said Birdy.

It took quite a while to gather all their choices from the different outlets. Mum said Birdy had to eat something with protein, so she peeled the top piece of bread off an egg mayonnaise sandwich and nibbled at it before she was allowed the doughnut. She ended up with egg mixture in her ears and jam all down her chin and needed a thorough wash in the Ladies' room afterwards.

Then they all went to the sweet shop to choose special treats for Christmas. Mum and Dad wanted a big tin of chocolate toffees because everyone liked them. They said Milo and Mia and Birdy could each choose one chocolate bar for themselves. They wandered around together, trying to make up their minds.

'Look!' said Milo, pointing to a big multipack of ten different kinds of chocolate. 'It says, "We Wish You a Merry Christmas!"'

Birdy immediately started singing again.

'Stop it!' said Mia, giving her a little nudge. 'Hey, we'd get three bars each, plus one over!'

'And I'd get the extra one because I spotted the packet and I'm the oldest,' said Milo.

'No, I'd get *all* of them because I'm the youngest,' said Birdy. She couldn't do division yet, but she was very good at arguing.

'Perhaps we ought to give a chocolate bar each to Mum and Dad, because our Christmas presents to them aren't all that great,' said Mia.

She had made cross-stitch coin purses for both of them. She'd worked hard, but trying to stitch neatly had made *her* very cross. Milo had made Mum and Dad a bookmark each out of leather. He'd written their names with a special gold pen, but they'd gone a bit smudgy. Birdy had made 'books' for both her parents. She'd cut out pieces of paper with her special blunt scissors and Mia had sewn them together for her to make two little booklets. Birdy had drawn a picture of Mum on one and a picture of Dad on the other. They looked identical – two

circles with dots for eyes and smiley mouths, and little stick arms and legs.

'Mum and Dad say they *like* homemade presents,' said Milo, but he could see Mia had a point.

'I made my lovely books for Mum and Dad,' said Birdy. 'I want to give a chocolate bar to Silky for her Christmas present.'

'Oh, no! We haven't got proper Christmas presents for all our Faraway Tree friends!' said Milo.

'We have to give Silky a present – and Moonface. And Pippin!' said Mia.

They were going to spend Christmas at the same holiday cottage they'd stayed in during the summer. It was on the edge of the wonderful Enchanted Wood. They had spent almost every day of their summer holiday in the middle of the woods, climbing up the amazing Faraway Tree and making friends with all the folk who lived there.

Silky was a kind fairy whose wings changed colour to match her beautiful dresses. Milo and Mia had thought they were long past the age of believing in fairies, but they had to agree that Silky was real.

Her best friend was Moonface, a sweet-natured magical man who could cast spells – sometimes! Pippin was an adorable talking bear cub who now had his own little bear cave in the Faraway Tree.

'Then what about the Saucepan Man and Mr Watzisname? They're our friends too,' said Milo.

'And Dame Washalot,' said Mia.

'Yes, she's a friend, though she's a menace when she empties her washtub down the tree and we get soaked,' said Milo.

'Especially you,' said Birdy, giggling.

'The Angry Pixie pours his jug of water over you too,' Mia pointed out.

'Well, maybe he'll stop doing it if we give him a Christmas present,' said Milo.

'He'll be a Happy Pixie then,' said Mia.

'So how many chocolate bars is that?' Milo wondered, counting on his fingers. 'Seven! So we still get one each! Awesome!'

'Yay! Awesome!' echoed Birdy. 'Can Silky have the biggest one?'

'Pippin must have the honeycomb bar!' said Mia.

'And we must give Moonface the big chocolate toffee bar because he loves toffee so,' said Milo, who was a big fan of Moonface's special Toffee Shocks.

'I can't wait to see them all!' said Mia.

Mum and Dad were happy to buy their multipack choice for them. They didn't explain it was going to be a present. Mum and Dad didn't know anything about their magic friends in the Faraway Tree. They'd just never believe it was possible to chat to a fairy or have tea with a little man who looked like the moon. Even Birdy knew she must never ever tell their parents just in case it would break some spell and they'd never find their way to the Faraway Tree ever again.

There was a toy vending machine near the exit to the car park – the sort where you work a special crane to grab one of the colourful teddies crammed inside. Dad was in such a jolly mood, he dug out some change from his pocket.

'Oh, dear, it's all in a muddle,' said Dad. 'I wish I had a special coin purse to keep it safe.'

'Really?' said Mia joyfully. She had the first go

on the machine, but couldn't manage to hook a toy, though several times she grazed an ear or a paw.

'Let me have a go. You're rubbish!' said Milo.

Milo found he wasn't any better and got annoyed. Birdy had her go and actually managed to lift a plump fairy up by her wings, but she couldn't make the crane keep hold of her. She got upset too, because she wanted it so much.

'Hey, kids, cheer up,' said Dad. 'No one's allowed to be grumpy when it's nearly Christmas! *I'll* have a go.'

He had several tries, but with no success whatsoever.

'It's a fix!' he said. 'There's no way anyone could get one of those wretched toys out – they're too tightly jammed in.'

'Now who's getting grumpy?' said Mum. 'Shall I have a go?'

She had three tries and manipulated the crane with such steady precision that she captured three toys. Each time, she slowly and carefully kept the claws of the crane clasped as she swung it over and

dropped it down the chute. Mum seized the plump fairy for Birdy, a green toy unicorn for Mia and a scarlet dragon for Milo.

They all cheered Mum – and Dad had the grace to cheer her loudest of all. Then they set off in the car again, and sang some more Christmas songs, and after a while the children got sleepy. It was rather a squash in the back, especially as Birdy had insisted on taking Gilbert, her huge toy dog, on holiday too. He was almost as big as she was.

Milo was shunted right up against one side of the back seat and Mia the other, and Birdy could hardly breathe with hairy Gilbert sprawled all over her, but at last they stopped fidgeting and fell fast asleep.

They didn't wake up until Dad called out, 'We're nearly there, kids!'

They peered out of the windows into the grey dusk and could just make out a vast wood down the hill below them, with one very tall tree that reached all the way up to the gathering clouds. The Magic Faraway Tree!