

Author Cork Millner's new novel, *The Christmas Ornament*, is a joy! It is a warm, magical story of Maggie, a six-year-old deaf girl, in her search for her mother, Mary, who created fantasy Christmas ornaments.

*The Christmas Ornament*

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*The Christmas  
Ornament*

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Author's website: [www.corkmillner.com](http://www.corkmillner.com)

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## *Chapter One*

### *Maggie*

*M*ary . . . made . . . Maggie presses her nose to the frosty window. Once again her gloved fingers sign the words: *Mary . . . made . . .*

Maggie's eyes sparkle, catching glints of light from the department store window display: Christmas ornaments, silver and gold, cascade in a shimmering waterfall of iridescent colors, each globe radiating rainbow-hued light into the snowy night. But one, only one—a crystalline sphere hanging from a gold ribbon—captivates her. This ornament, cupped lovingly in the branches of the Christmas tree, cradles the light, giving birth from deep within to the image of a fantasy queen.

To six-year-old Maggie this is more than a Christmas ornament. It has life.

Soft snow falls on tiny girl's cheeks. She blinks, and her eyelashes brush away the flakes. Maggie shivers and hugs her red coat to her body. She wears green stockings and yellow rubber boots. One finger pokes out of a hole in a knit glove.

She tugs her stocking cap tighter to her ears, then reaches out and touches the department store window, trying to press through the glass to caress the translucent queen.

Again her fingers flutter: *Mary . . . made . . .*

“Well, just look at that, isn't she a doll,” a passing shopper says, holding tightly to the arm of her husband, careful not to slip on the icy carpet of white. “Isn't that a cute outfit? She looks like a Christmas bell.”

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“C’mon, honey,” the man says.

“Why, look at her, she’s all alone.” The woman steps up to Maggie. “Little girl?”

Maggie puffs on the window creating a foggy halo.

“Little girl?” The woman taps her on the shoulder.

Maggie’s head turns; looking upward, showing dark brown eyes in ovals of white. She stares blankly at the woman.

“Little girl? Are you lost?”

Maggie points at the window and signs: *Mary . . . made . . .*

The woman looks hard at the ornaments, then at Maggie’s fingers, confused.

The man pulls on his wife’s arm. “Hon’, I’m freezing; let’s get inside.” The woman gives a lingering look at the tiny figure, then allows her husband to lead her through the wall of air that blasts from overhead heaters, then into the department store.

Christmas music—“Oh, come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant”—welcomes each shopper as they enter the department store. A forest of Christmas glitter: aluminum trees adorned with red balls, green plastic garlands and flickering lights garnish each nook and cranny of the store. A cacophony of voices drifting upward from the crowd of shoppers intermingles with the holiday music. From one wall a massive flag of Texas hangs limply. Underneath the flag is a sign proclaiming:

### **LONE STAR DEPARTMENT STORE**

Near the store’s heated entry, an elderly man by the name of John Samuel Lindle is stooped over a confectionery counter studying an array of candy canes. The fresh smell of cinnamon and sugar make his nose twitch as if a fly had landed on it. He has the stubble of a white beard, a kind, but worried

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countenance, and nervous demeanor. He wears a thick Mackinaw coat, the collar turned up high on his neck, and a red hunter's cap, the flaps like woolen wings. With a heavily veined hand that looks like bones wrapped in brown tissue paper, he motions to a busy clerk behind the counter. "Ma'am. I, ah . . ."

The clerk, harried by several customers, pays no attention. John Samuel picks up a package of red-and-white candy canes. "Ma'am, how much are these?"

In a brisk tone, the clerk taps on the cellophane with a pencil. "Look right there: price is marked on the package."

John Samuel presses his hearing aid tighter to his ear. "Ma'am, you mind saying that all over? With all this sound, the music and all, this confounded thing is kinda like I'm inside a hive of bees."

The clerk jabs at the package of candy canes with the pencil, indicating it needs to be flipped over.

John Samuel turns the bag, finds the sticker, and reads it with shock. "Uh, eight dollars and ninety-five cents? That don't seem right."

"That's the price," the clerk says. She jabs the pencil into her curly hairdo and turns to another customer.

John Samuel puts the bag back on the counter and picks up a large candy cane. "How much for this; just one?"

The clerk gives it a quick look. "Seventy-five cents."

John Samuel shakes his head in wonder, then grubs in his worn coat pocket for the money. In a voice that is a mixture of corn syrup and stammer, he says, "I . . . well, I remember when I was a boy. Why, we could buy a whole bag . . . a real right-sized bag, enough to decorate a Christmas tree; hang from every branch, for only, well, seems like they were only . . ."

He runs down as he realizes his mouth is doing all the talking and no one's listening. The clerk is packaging a gift for a customer and hasn't paid any attention. John Samuel counts

seventy-five cents onto the palm of his hand and slides it across the glass counter.

The clerk glances at the coins. "Five cents tax."

John Samuel searches another pocket, discovers a nickel, and drops it on the counter where it spins like a tiny top.

"I suppose you want a bag," the clerk says.

"No, it's for Maggie. She's—"

He jerks his head around, searching the aisle behind him. Startled by seeing nothing but the blur of legs from passing shoppers, he looks down another aisle, then leans far over the candy counter to check behind it.

"Maggie?" he says, confused.

The clerk shakes her head and grumbles to herself: "Not gonna be easy getting rid of this here big spender." Louder, she says, "Might I ask what y'all are looking for?"

"My great-granddaughter. She's about"—the palm of his hand rises, then lowers, stopping at his hip—"this high."

"This is not a nursery," the clerk says.

Several customers shove in front of John Samuel. He backs away. With one last futile look around, he turns toward the exit. In a gangling gait, like a circus clown on spindly legs, he ambles through the exit's blast of warm air . . . and into the gently falling snow.

John Samuel hears the tinkling of a bell from a Salvation Army Santa Claus, then the sound of footsteps squeaking on the snow as a hurrying shopper, eager to get out of the cold, bumps into him, almost knocking him down. Righting himself, John Samuel searches through the blur of snowflakes, and is relieved to see Maggie standing in front of the department store window, the light from the display of ornaments encircling her like a halo.

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He shudders from a brisk wind curling around the corner of the building and pulls the flaps of his hunter's cap over his ears. He ambles toward Maggie and taps her on the shoulder, then lifts her into his arms. Her cheeks and nose are a frosty pink. When he sees her eyes on his lips, he says, "Maggie. I thought you were in the—"

She presses a cold fingertip to his mouth and replies in her coded charade of fingers, *Grand Poppy*.

"Maggie, I was a little worried. You should have stayed inside where it's warm." He takes the bare finger that pokes through the frayed end of her glove and blows warm air on it. Holding her tightly, he turns his back to the wind to protect her. "We best find us a warm fire," he says.

Not understanding the rubbery movement of his lips, Maggie points to the window and signs: *Mary . . . made*.

John Samuel cocks his head; not sure he read her sign.

Maggie points at the myriad of radiant ornaments and signs again: *Mary . . . made*.

John Samuel squints through the darts of light to the display of decorations and sees the dazzling ornament. For a moment he stares at it with the look of the very old, as if his eyes could wipe away the mystery of the object and reveal its true nature, then a pained look deepens the heavy lines of his face. He shakes his head and snow sifts off the brim of his cap. *No, it's just some kind of illusion*, he thinks. *Mary's gone. There just aren't any more of Mary's creations*. He looks at the ornament once again. *No, beautiful as this one is, it's not one of hers*.

*It can't be.*

He bends and eases Maggie's boots to the snow, then crouches down, the bones in his knees creaking in protest. He pulls off a glove and says, "Maggie, I've got this little box of ornaments—" He digs in his coat pocket, pulls out a package,

and lifts the lid off to reveal a half-dozen small, multi-colored ornaments snuggled in the carton. “Not as pretty as Mary’s.”

Maggie touches the bed of shiny balls. Her gloved fingers move quickly, as she signs, *Color . . . egg*. She peers upward and looks sadly at her great-grand-father’s face. Lips quivering, she turns back to the window.

John Samuel shakes his head, then brightens. “Now, my father always told me, ‘If you see something you can’t have, then just get yourself something you can.’ ” He fishes in the seemingly bottomless pockets of his coat and pulls out a few coins. “I got us enough to get maybe two bags of popcorn.” He takes Maggie’s hand and leads her away from the window. “We could thread one bag of popcorn on a string for the tree—”

Maggie tugs on his sleeve and points to her lips.

“Oh, there I am mumbling to myself again.” He bends down. Slowly, mouthing the words carefully, he repeats, “Pop . . . corn.”

Maggie cocks her head like a puppy confused with a new sound.

His gloved fingers work clumsily: *Tree . . . pop . . . corn*.

Maggie nods her head, eyes bright, as she understands.

“Right!” John Samuel says with a jerky nod of his head. “We’ll do it just like Mary would, decorate the tree with our hearts.” He blows out a puff of air and it billows white. “Then maybe, just maybe, the other bag we’ll”—he thrusts his head up and gobbles like a turkey—“gobble the other bag right down.”

Maggie giggles and touches his lips.

As they walk hand-in-hand through the winnowing snow, she takes one last look over her shoulder at the ornament: the light from the globe shatters the crystalline air into a multitude of colors. Through the falling snow the ornaments in the window blur, then appear to stretch until they are as large as—

Balloons.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Santa Royal's Gold Coast Plaza*

**B**alloons! Thousands of brightly colored balloons rise into the sky, as strings of serpentine ribbon wiggle from their tails. From below comes the sound of a pipe organ playing, "Joy to the World."

And a child-like voice: "Hot dog! Look at them go. Up, up and away!"

Another voice, this one snippy, asks: "How many balloons does that make, Jay Jay?"

"Thousands! Look at them go! It's like confetti sprinkled from the heavens." Jay Jay continues to stare skyward, peering around the bundle of multi-colored, helium-filled balloons he holds in his hand: they hover over his head, waving in a light breeze. His eyeglasses are so smeared with fingerprints that it's a wonder he can see the multitude of balloons drifting higher in the sky.

Jay Jay Rumble is short man of forty-five with a froggish face, thick neck, and shoulders that slope like a bottle in his rumpled gray-and-blue-plaid sport coat. He wears a green bow tie, which has two red lights imbedded in its folds. He blinks them every now and then from his pocket battery, much to the annoyance of his public relations partner, Melvin Kratz.

"Jay Jay," Melvin says with a roll of his eyes, "how many? We have to report how many balloons. It's money, remember?"

Enraptured by the balloons, Jay Jay pays no attention to Melvin's harangue. He, like the hundreds of shoppers who have

gathered for this festive event at Santa Royale's Gold Coast Plaza—"The largest outdoor shopping mall in central California!" Melvin Kratz is quick to say—is mesmerized by the balloons. Onlookers crane their necks skyward, watching as the balloons rise above the plaza's red-tiled roofs, then drift toward the line of mountains to the east. A layer of clouds, like soft smoke, has settled into the creases of the nearby foothills. Above the ridge of mountains the cobalt sky is clear.

Melvin's voice rises an octave. "How many!"

The high pitch finally records in Jay Jay's mind. He replies, "We bought five-hundred boxes; at a gross per box, that's—Wow! Look at 'em go."

Melvin frowns and his narrow eyes squint even tighter. He is a few years older than Jay Jay, but unlike his chubby coworker, Melvin is built like a coat hanger: all Adam's apple and hooked nose, a profile that gives the impression of a bird of prey. His fringe of hair is parted near one ear and the few remaining strands are plastered across his freckled head. He sports a pencil-thin mustache, which he has a tendency to pluck at nervously.

"Jay Jay, *please*," Melvin says, smoothing the lapels of his tailored pinstriped business suit. "Tally the numbers. We need to add up the cost."

Melvin's entreaties are of no avail, as Jay Jay interrupts with: "How far do you suppose they'll fly?" He holds tightly his bundle of balloons' ribbons. "Maybe to Las Vegas?"

Melvin curls his lip, showing a gold filling that glints in the sunlight. "*Nothing* goes far in Vegas."

Eyes wide, Jay Jay says, "Maybe one of them will make it to San Diego."

"And end up in someone's back yard? We'll get sued for littering." He leans down to his pudgy partner and taps one balloon with a fingernail. "Remember, it was *your* idea to stamp

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Gold Coast Plaza on the balloons along with the Santa Royale address.”

Jay Jay jerks the balloon away from Melvin’s pointed fingernail. “Yes, but—”

The bundle of balloons bounces off Melvin’s head, and he brushes them aside. In the tone of a father consoling a child, he says, “It’s a *good* idea. We have to let the customer know where the shopping mall is located. It’s our business to disseminate information about Gold Coast Plaza.”

The oft-repeated lecture filters harmlessly on Jay Jay’s ears. He has his eyes on the balloons, which are drifting farther east, rising above the ridge of mountains. On the tip of his toes, trying to stretch a few more inches skyward, he says, “Maybe one will fly to Mexico!”

Melvin slaps his forehead and turns away, almost crashing into Lexi, Mayor Marshall M. Manning’s executive secretary, who has pressed her way through the crowd. “Melvin. Jay Jay,” she says, tugging on the sleeves of their coats. “Come *on*. The mayor’s waiting.”

This breaks Jay Jay free from his reverie, as he remembers: “Oh, my, the mayor.”

“He’s not getting any happier waiting,” Lexi adds, crossing her arms.

Melvin smiles weakly. At the same time he admires Lexi’s tall, fashion-model shape, the short business skirt, the sleek legs in dark hose. Melvin is not the first to envy Mayor Manning, who inherited Lexi from his predecessor and kept her on as executive secretary.

Her dark eyes steady on Melvin. “I don’t think standing like mutes is going to please the mayor.”

Melvin points at Jay Jay. “It’s *his* fault. His mind—if that’s what it can be called—is off in Toyland.”

Lexi sighs and combs her fingers through her raven-black hair. “Come on, hurry.” She turns and walks briskly down the open-air mall, her shoulder brushing a plastic Christmas tree lashed to a pillar. She hurries by groups of shoppers dressed casually in shorts, tee shirts and tennis shoes. Their clothes are in sharp contrast to Lexi’s professional attire.

Melvin follows her, Jay Jay stumbling along behind him. “Don’t let that last bunch of balloons get away,” he hisses over his shoulder. Jay Jay grasps the ribbons tighter, walking sideways as he looks skyward. He bumps into a scrawny Salvation Army Santa Claus, almost knocking over the hanging bucket.

Like a father to a wayward child, Melvin says, “Jay Jay! Watch where you’re going.”

The two of them snake in dizzying curves through the shoppers, Jay Jay’s balloons jiggling through the maze of people. They pass a fountain sculpted in brass, which shows three dolphins cavorting in a spray of water. Around the fountain, pigeons strut and peck at bits of a cookie tossed by a small girl. Two boys charge through the pigeons waving their arms, and the birds take wing, rising like swirls of paper caught by the wind.

Melvin quickens his step as the crowd envelops Lexi. He passes four carolers in period costumes, singing, “Little Town of Bethlehem.” Jay Jay pauses to hum along, then seeing Melvin jerking his thumb at him, scurries on.

Jay Jay’s nose twitches as it picks up the enticing odors of melted cheese, pepperoni, basil and garlic that curl from an Italian open-air trattoria. He passes a seafood restaurant, which displays iced fresh fish in a glass cooler, and next to it and a tank of live lobsters. The smell of the sea is pungent and cool. A dozen shoppers take a break at a coffee shop, sipping from steaming cups of cappuccino. The roasted aroma blends with the fish and the pizza into a scented symphony.

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The sound of a calliope grows louder as Melvin and Jay Jay near the plaza's carousel, which is chock-full of girls and boys. The gaiety of the children and the spinning merry-go-round causes Jay Jay to pause again.

Melvin hurries back, his stiff wingtip oxfords clumping loudly on the tile walkway. He grabs Jay Jay by the arm, propelling him on. "Hurry!"

Jay Jay saunters on, following Melvin, whose nose cuts through the air like the prow of a sailing ship. Lexi has been lost in the crowd. They pass another fountain, this one in blue tile: gurgling water bubbles from the center of the shallow pool. Their progress quickens as the crowd thins. Jay Jay searches the sky for his balloons, but the mall's Spanish tower, capped by a cone-shaped red tile roof, blocks his view.

The glint of the sun reflecting off the window of The Doll House, the plaza's toy store, catches Jay Jay's eye. Still holding the tethered balloons, he peers into the store's display window at an eight-foot-tall Christmas tree, which is adorned with dolls of all imaginable sizes and shapes. He moves his face closer to the window until his nose touches the glass. There, hanging from a branch, is a majestic Christmas ornament, one that emits darts of multi-colored light. Embedded in the center of the sphere is the image of a queen wearing a golden crown and a translucent gown. Jay Jay stares hypnotically at the image, until he feels himself being drawn deep within the circle, one in which the figure of the queen changes with each movement of his eyes.

"Oh, my," he says in a hushed voice.

"Jay Jay!" Melvin's call shatters his reverie. "Quit paying dolls!" He yanks on Jay Jay's arm and pulls him away from the Doll Store window.

Jay Jay plants his feet, points at the ornament, and recites: "F.W. Woolworth and his five-and-dime stores brought glass

balls to the masses. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert decorated their tree with bonbons and gingerbread. Swedish immigrants in the early 1900s hung their trees with silver knives, forks and spoons—”

Melvin spins him around and looks at him curiously. “How do you know all that?”

“I don’t, my mind does.”

“And the mayor’s going to have the last piece of it if we don’t hurry.” He pushes Jay Jay ahead, who glances back at the window as he is being propelled away. The Christmas ornament sways from its golden ribbon.

Mayor Marshall M. Manning is standing before a Spanish fountain, his back to the cascade of water spilling down the fountain’s tiers. The mayor’s tailored gray suit does not quite conceal his thickening waist. Nor does the mayor’s shock of hair, tinted silver gray, succeed in looking natural. He stands as straight and tall as he can in shoes that have been elevated an extra two inches with thick soles and heels. Around him is a throng of elderly ladies for whom he preens, dispensing charm like soup to the poor.

One of the ladies gushes, “Mayor, I think this is the cleverest idea, all those balloons.”

“Oh, it’s just like New Year’s Eve,” a matronly companion bubbles.

Mayor Manning smiles, a large mouth-widening, teeth-shimmering smile. To his office staff, his smile is likened to the “flash of a half-concealed knife,” one that is regarded with intense apprehension.

“All we need is the champagne,” the mayor says. Shading his eyes from the light piercing through the fountain’s cascading spray, he looks up at the fast disappearing balloons. In sonorous

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tones, he says, “Just look at those fragile, wingless birds, flying to who knows where . . . like little, ah, lost angels.”

Fred, the local newspaper photographer, who has opened his camera bag and is selecting a wide-angle lens, smiles wryly. Between chews on a wad of bubble gum, he says, “Want me to quote you on that, Mr. Mayor? ‘Little lost angels?’ ”

“Just try to keep your camera in focus, Fred,” the mayor says, keeping his voice light, his teeth tight.

Lexi pushes through the mayor’s circle of admirers, then turns to look for Jay Jay and Melvin. One of the matronly ladies purses her lips disdainfully at Lexi’s short skirt.

Mayor Manning taps irritably on the face of his watch. “Well?”

Over the heads of the crowd, Lexi spies Jay Jay’s bundle of balloons wiggling its way toward them. “They’re coming.”

Jay Jay, puffing like a child’s toy train engine, is bodily thrust into the mayor’s presence by Melvin, who says, “We got the last bundle of balloons, Mr. Mayor. Ready to release for the picture.”

“Finally.” Mayor Manning smiles, the knife-edge polished. “Fred, camera ready?”

Jay Jay steps up to the mayor, arm thrust outward with the balloons. Before Mayor Manning can grab them, the ribbons slip from Jay Jay’s fingers and the balloons drift skyward, out of everyone’s reach. That is, except for the ribbon of one red balloon, which Jay Jay manages to hold on to. There is an embarrassed silence. Jay Jay, with a hangdog look, offers the red balloon’s ribbon to the mayor. “I’m sorry,” he manages to say.

Mayor Manning, his face turning a crimson shade to match the balloon, gets himself under control. He stares at the carefree balloons, as they rise higher and higher. Then he turns to Jay Jay, eyes narrowed.

Lexi, saving the day, as usual, steps between them and pulls a felt tip pen from her appointment book. She hands it to the mayor. “Why don’t you autograph this last balloon for the picture.”

Relieved, Jay Jay says, “That’s a good idea. Who knows where this one will fly? Maybe Alaska.”

“Maybe Siberia,” Melvin growls into his partner’s ear, “which is where we’re going if you don’t shape up.”

Reluctantly, the mayor cradles the red balloon in his arm. He raises the felt tip pen, holding it like a dart; more inclined to puncture the balloon than sign it. “Now, if Fred is ready with his camera,” he hisses between his teeth.

Melvin and Jay Jay move in closer to get into the picture. Fred says, “Smile, and say ‘greed.’ ”

Mayor Manning smolders at this flippant comment, then, for the effect it will have on the ladies, he signs the squeaky red surface. The camera’s shutter freezes the scene. The balloon rises to the end of its serpentine tether and is released into the sky.

They all watch it go, its sinuous flight aided by the light breeze, taking it first in one direction, then the other, as if the balloon is deciding which way to go. Then, warmed by the sun, its surface glowing like a hot coal, the balloon wiggles away, rising past a few wisps of cirrus clouds.

Then out of sight.

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