

# RETURN TO CLOULAND



CHIP HILL

# CLOUDLAND books by Chip Hill

Volume 1

CLOUDLAND

Volume 2

RETURN TO CLOUDLAND

Volume 3

BEYOND CLOUDLAND

# RETURN TO CLOUDLAND

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Illustrations by Michael Kelley

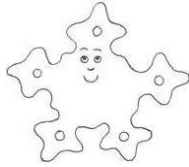
RETURN TO  
CLOUDLAND

CHIP HILL

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
MICHAEL KELLEY

*For my grandchildren Shiloh, Karis, Nathan,  
Lorelei and Forrest*

# 1. Strange Weather



A cold wind whistled through the pine trees, bending the branches and carrying needles and twigs along with it. Robbie's exposed cheeks shone pink, made numb by the constant sting of the wind.

"You should have worn a hat," he called to his older sister, Jane, in a mocking tone as he watched her blond hair flap furiously around her face.

Stopping and holding her shoulder-length hair in place with one hand, she scooped up a pinecone from the path and threw it at him. As the pinecone sailed past, he made a motion with

his arms like he was swinging a baseball bat. “The next one doesn’t miss,” she called back with a laugh.

“Most fun I’ve had in days,” he replied. “This wind is driving me nuts! Nothing but wind, wind, wind! I’ll take some snow, rain, sleet—anything at this point but wind.”

“Yeah,” said Jane, “I really anticipated this winter vacation with Uncle Josh, but this wind sucks my energy.”

They were headed to their uncle’s house now. As she walked along, Jane pulled a ribbon from her coat pocket and, with some difficulty, tied her hair back in a ponytail. “Remember when we asked Uncle Josh about the wind?” she continued.

“Yeah,” said Robbie. He replayed the scene, assuming a serious face. “So, Uncle Josh stares up at the sky and he says—Ow!”

“What?” Jane said, turning to face him. “No, he didn’t.”

“Sorry,” responded Robbie, rubbing his forehead. “Got hit by a twig or something in the

wind.” He resumed, lowering his voice like his Uncle Josh’s. “Old Mr. North Wind’s acting up, but I’ve never known him to carry on this long.” Robbie paused, “You know, the way he said it was like he actually *had* known Mr. North Wind.”

“He was talking about Mr. North Wind from his Cloudland stories of course,” offered Jane. “And I can see how this wind we’re having could remind you of mean, nasty Mr. North Wind blowing down Cold Wind Mountain in those stories.”

Memories of sitting at Uncle Josh’s feet in front of the fire as he told stories about Cloudland flooded them both. Many times, they dreamed of being in that strange world in the sky.

“Cloudland,” their uncle had explained, “was a wonderful land ruled by King Nature and his principal assistant, Professor Because. They belonged to a race of people, relatively few in number, called the Witherin, who have four arms and blue skin. In the central part of



Cloudland were large villages where many Snowflakes and their children lived. There were nice creatures called Bumbles and not-so-nice Wag Wag birds, angry, bothersome things who hopped through the air and snorted and talked way too much. The Striped River was the most wonderful thing in Cloudland. It made beautiful tinkling music as it flowed from the Shiver-me Forest and through Cloudland like a crystal rainbow.”

“Right. While we’re on the subject of Cloudland,” said Robbie, rubbing his forehead again, “do you remember when we brought up rainbows with him?”

“Yes!” Jane said. “I sure wasn’t expecting his response. Did you see his expression when we said we couldn’t remember the last time we’d seen a rainbow?”

“Yeah! That was weird.” Robbie added, shaking his head. “He said, ‘Something’s wrong. Something’s terribly wrong. The pool must be dry. Or worse.’ What did he mean by that?”

“I’m guessing another reference to Cloudland,” continued Jane, “but I have no idea what it means.” She squinted, and through the trees could just make out the clearing where their uncle’s timber frame house stood. She pointed to it. “Looks like we’ll make it back before—” she stopped mid-sentence, her mouth hanging open, and tried to make sense of all the strange thoughts and feelings running through her head.

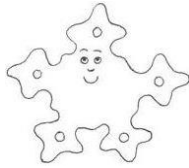
The wind had stopped!

Robbie stared at Jane with his mouth open too, then turned his head from side to side. Neither of them spoke but stood perfectly still, listening. Finally, Robbie said, “My ears are ringing. It’s like turning off the leaf blower after it’s been running for a while.”

“Yes, but—” Jane stared at the cabin again, then back at Robbie. “I got the strangest feeling when the wind stopped. We’d better go find Uncle Josh.”

Robbie nodded, and the two of them started jogging down the path toward the clearing.

## 2. Two Visitors



With the sudden drop in wind noise, the kids now heard sounds all around them; a bird chirping, their feet shuffling through leaves and dirt on the path, and the swish of Jane’s coat sleeve against her coat. The return of these sounds was reassuring to both. But as Jane’s breathing sped up from the jogging, she whispered to herself, “I just can’t shake this feeling that more has changed than just the weather.”

Robbie started huffing and puffing too. He looked over and saw Jane talking to herself, concern on her face. He tried to make small talk between breaths. “Uncle Josh said something—about soup for lunch today—that sound good to you?”

Jane didn't answer but quickened her pace as they entered the clearing of their uncle's house. It was a two-story house in a log cabin style, two dormers in a roof sloping back, with a wide porch running the length of the front. The kids leaned over for a moment or two with their hands on their knees to catch their breath. Then, trotting up the steps, Jane opened the door and tossed her coat in a chair. "Are you here, Uncle Josh?" she called.

"Sure am," came a man's voice from the back of the house. "Be there in a minute."

Robbie came in, still breathing deeply and rubbing his hands together, and tossed his coat in the chair, too.

A tall man with a white beard, wearing a colorful sweater, came in from the living room. "How was the walk?" asked their Uncle Josh with a wave toward the door. And then seeing their red faces he added with a smile, "or should I say run?" Not waiting for an answer, he went on. "I need to make an introduction, and then I

think an adventure awaits. You should go of course, I'm getting too old for this sort of thing.”

Before they could even guess what this meant, into the room stumbled two very peculiar creatures. Resembling white beach balls a couple of feet high, with legs and arms sticking out in every direction, they almost rolled into the room. "Jane and Robbie, meet Legs and Roly," said Uncle Josh. "You may remember them from my Cloudland stories.”

Jane and Robbie stared. Their mouths dropped open, and Robbie brought both hands to his face. Jane even thought to pinch herself. No, she wasn't dreaming. She glanced up, and her uncle winked at her. He had the most wonderful smile on his face.

She answered his smile with a stunned expression and said, "Uncle Josh, I need a moment." She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then she went on in a halting voice, "The whole Cloudland thing. The cabin in the Shiver-me Forest. Griffis. Was that really you? And the balloon?" At this point she remembered

the picture of a balloon on his wall next to the door and studied it. “The stories—your wonderful stories—are actually true?”

Her uncle shrugged his shoulders and kept smiling at her. Robbie stared at the Bumbles, speechless.



Jane and Robbie meet the Bumbles

Legs—or was it Roly—broke the silence. "Good day," he said in a rhythmic, soft-toned voice. "We are Bumbles from Cloudland, which we believe your uncle has told you about. I'm Legs, and this is my brother Roly. We are very pleased to meet you. However, I'm afraid there isn't much time to get acquainted properly."

At this point Roly spoke up. "If I may ask, you've surely noticed the strange weather? It is but one indication of serious happenings in Cloudland. Even as we speak, King Nature is in desperate trouble." At this last statement, both Bumbles threw several hands over their eyes and shuddered.

"I guessed something of the kind," muttered Uncle Josh.

Roly continued. "We didn't know what else to do, so we came to our dear friend Griffis here for help." Both Bumbles looked up at Josh, or Griffis as they called him.

"We found Mr. East Wind," added Legs, "and he was eager to help. He was able to confer with Professor Because who provided advice. We

waited until Mr. North Wind had to refill his wind supply, and Mr. East Wind brought us here. He's with us now."

Jane and Robbie turned their heads, inspecting their surroundings, but saw nothing.

"Legs and Roly tell me they'll need to return before old Mr. North Wind cranks up again," broke in Uncle Josh. "They gave me a quick summary of the situation up there. I think we can really impact things because no one will expect help from outside Cloudland."

He paused and gazed at Jane and Robbie. "As I said, I'm not as young as I used to be. I know this all sounds too fantastic. But I do know that you, Jane and Robbie, are smart and resourceful. I have faith that whatever needs to be done, you can do it."

Jane's and Robbie's eyes went wide. "Uncle Josh," Jane said slowly, then paused. "Are you saying Robbie and I should, uh, go to Cloudland, with uh, Mr. East Wind, to uh, face who knows what?"