

WELLINGTON RABBIT

ALL ABOARD



Written and Illustrated by

Sandra Leigh Jett Ball

To Culper the Culprit,
a most bodacious Bodacion

and

in honor of Gustav
who makes Cheshire Cat look perfect

Titles set in Harrington Bold
Text set in Harrington and Goudy Old Style

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Table of Contents

Preface		4
Chapter 1	Tea and Tarts	7
Chapter 2	A Long Lost Friend	11
Chapter 3	What to Make of That	15
Chapter 4	The Cheshire Cat	19
Chapter 5	A Recitation	23
Chapter 6	Something Amiss	27
Chapter 7	The Search Begins	31
Chapter 8	A Detour	35
Chapter 9	Georg to the Rescue	39
Chapter 10	Caught!	43
Epilogue		46

Index to Illustrations

Bethleann spies a friend	6
Velveteen and Golden start the hunt	10
Bethleann tumbles over and over and over	14
The Cheshire Cat wants to chat	18
Wellington introduces Georg	22
Georg recites a favorite poem	26
Velveteen and Golden look for the right train	30
Velveteen and Golden help Mr. E fix lunch	34
Bethleann and George drift along in dreamland	38
Wellington upsets Mr. E	42

Preface

Easter is early this year and thus the sprint for the finish line is even more hectic. I really try to start writing sooner than I do, but things just seem to get in the way. And last minute pressure is definitely an inspiration. Donny as always makes this homespun publication a little less gangly looking, especially working under the time constraints I allow him. Even he, magician that he is, can only work but so much magic, so please overlook the mistakes and enjoy.

Lewis is responsible for the story line involving *The Velveteen Rabbit*. He noticed, quite correctly, my omission of that famous rabbit from any dialogue or plot. So he gave me my own copy of the book by Margery Williams for Christmas to jog my memory as I started writing this year's chronicles.

I added the character Golden in honor of *The Country Bunny and the Gold Shoes* by DuBose Heyward because it has always been a favorite Easter book of mine.

The poem is one I wrote to Emily after she left home to go to school at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. It won third prize in a *Cricket Magazine* competition. I used to assign the monthly Cricket League competitions to the guys as homeschool projects. Then in the early nineties Cricket League changed the rules of the competitions to include all ages and I was caught. The boys decided that if they entered the competitions, well, then I should too. So I did and even won several art prizes as well as writing.

The poem by Tennyson is one I had to learn in the seventh grade and I, like Georg, flubbed remembering the author in my recitation. Chagrined to this day!

About Ben Adam is a poem my mother used to read to me almost daily. It is one of her absolute favorites.

I've always had a great fascination for trains. My grandmother used to take me on short train rides from our home in Farmville, Virginia. We would ride to Lynchburg and back. Oh, I did love that treat.

I rode the train a lot when I was in college, too. It was an easy way to get home to Alexandria, Virginia from school which was Richmond Professional Institute in Richmond, Virginia. I was studying Fine Arts there.

There possibly will be more to this preface but not right now.

Time to put the book to bed.

Happy Easter everyone!

Sandra Ball
Bayside, Colington Island
Easter 2005





Chapter 1

Tea and Tarts

Wellington eased back in his chair. “What do you think, Bethleann?” he pondered. “Those crackle shell eggs might look pretty, but do you think they will hold up okay during transportation?” Wellington and his two best buddies in the whole world, Bethleann and Georg, were sipping tea at the Doggone Inn and comparing notes about Easter deliveries.

You see, the three were responsible for delivering Easter love to girls and boys throughout the world. Wellington and Bethleann both delivered gaily-colored Easter eggs. And Georg delivered wish flowers. I will tell you more about that in a minute, but first let me explain how in the world Wellington and Bethleann could possibly carry all the eggs needed for an entire Easter delivery. Quite simply, they do not. Wellington procures the eggs he delivers from his cleverly lined haversack, a gift from Uncle Wells, who was the Easter Bunny before bestowing the title on Wellington and fading to the land of the WEB. A fine place where all former Easter bunnies retire for daylong games of hopscotch and naps in the warm sun, but that is another story.

Bethleann, on the other hand, being a level five accomplished magician, uses a low-level incantation to decorate each Easter basket with eggs of all tints and hues. Wellington gets around with his magic cape, another gift from Uncle Wells, but this one came to him on his third birthday, although he was a grown rabbit before he knew of its magical powers. Bethleann has the ability to fly using the buttons on her favorite togs, her always comfortable and ever handy farmer jeans, to control her speed and direction.

Now about Georg. All the wish flower seeds are processed in Uncle Wells’ dell located beside his cottage which, by the way, now belongs to Wellington. Everyone still refers to the dwelling as Uncle Wells’ though. Actually, all the rabbits in the warren think that Uncle Wells is on an extended vacation with Wellington looking after his home and belongings. They know nothing of the true identity of the Easter Bunny or the WEB. And Wellington is a good caretaker, but as he (and Georg too, for that matter) has his own comfortable cottage close by, he decided to keep Uncle Wells’ house available for his ever expanding circle of close friends and Easter helpers. Bethleann was, for the time being anyway, a permanent resident there, as she found Willis Warren the best place ever to live, but fear not, there is still plenty of room for occasional visitors. And this suits Wellington just fine all the way around.

But back to the wish flowers. Georg nurses and tends the blooming flowers all through the late spring and summer. He faithfully harvests the ready seeds and stores them away tenderly for later transfer to his trusty rumplesack for the Easter journey. Georg is also a very accomplished magician, albeit only a level three, but as every good magician knows, the level three exam is the hardest one except for level six. Level three is all about transportation spells and stealth movements, so Georg is very versed in ways to move himself along from place to place at a powerful speed when needed.

The story of the wish flower is one of the best. All the children who cannot receive colored eggs for one reason or another get a special planting of a wish flower as close as possible

to their everyday path. It does not even matter if they live far from the countryside and not at all near green growing plants. The tiniest bit of dirt will work. Wish flowers look like ordinary dandelions but are ever so much more special. For a wish flower to work, it has to be ready to seed. But there is more. A child needs to pick the flower, make a wish and blow all the seeds into the air.

Now this is where the magic comes in. If a fairy catches the wish seed, the wish will come true. Fairies are especially good at catching wish flower seeds, so wishes are granted with great regularity. Sometimes it does take awhile for the actual wish to come to fruition, so you should not despair if you are a wish flower child. Give it time ~ your wish is surely in the works.

As Easter was coming earlier than usual this year, the three friends had much to accomplish under a shortened calendar. Not that they did not have plenty of time since last Easter to do their preparations; but all three were great procrastinators and when January rolled around with Easter scheduled for the end of March, well, things began to get just a bit hairy.

They decided to do the bulk of their planning at the Doggone Tea Room & Inn. New to the warren, it had quickly become their favorite eatery. Doggone was run by a friendly bodacion who goes by the name of Culper the Culprit. Rumor has it that he is great friends with that powerful wizard, Lewis the Legendary, but no one could ever muster the courage to ask. Some things were best left alone.

By doing their planning at the Doggone they would eat well and be free to explore ideas uninterrupted. Normally they would have been able to recruit their beloved young friend, Webby (formerly called little bunny, but now named Webster, after Wellington's great-great uncle in a glorious naming ceremony held last spring) to kitchen prep duty, but he was off visiting his mum and would not be back for weeks.

"I dunno, Wellington," replied Bethleann. "You have a point but the kips so loved the multi-colored real true sparkle eggs we delivered last spring I thought a crackle would be a nice follow-up." She took a generous bite from a warm wild blueberry tart she had selected from a huge platter of pastries Mr Culper had just brought to their table. "Ummmm, this tart is delicious," she oozed the words, all the while licking butter from the sides of her mouth. "Who ordered them?"

"Ndmbe," mumbled Georg, his mouth full of a rhubarb tart he had snatched from the plate of warm treats.

Wellington shook his head and reached for a strawberry tart. A good shake of cinnamon followed by a dusting of powdered sugar and Wellington was ready to satiate his watering mouth, which he did in record time.

"Lessee," pondered Bethleann, "lemon or cherry...," reaching for another.

"Excuse me, Mr. Wellington." At that moment, Miss Hilarey, Culper's able assistant approached the table and bent down to speak to Wellington in a conservative tone. "The gentleman and lady rabbit across the way wonder if they might have a word with you." She indicated a kindly looking couple sitting a few tables away. "The tea tarts are compliments of them."

Wellington looked up and wiped his mouth with his napkin. "And those tarts were the best. Perfect, perfect. I did not realize how ready I was for these treats. They are absolutely

fabulous!" He peered across the tearoom at the couple. "Don't believe I know them," he squinted again in their direction. "Say Bethleann, Georg - do they look familiar to either of you?" he inquired of his companions.

Bethleann and Georg stopped eating for a moment and turned their attention to the couple. Georg took a quick look, shook his head and returned to eating his tart.

Bethleann eyes widened, her mouth fell open. "Oh my," she blurted out. She put down the lemon tart she was getting ready to bite into. "Oh my, oh my," she said again. "Can it really be?"



Chapter 2

A Long Lost Friend

Wellington and Georg looked at Bethleann, waiting for her to say something more. Instead, she got up and dashed across the room, calling over her shoulder, "I'll be right back."

Wellington and Georg watched as she approached the table where the two rabbits that Miss Hilarey had pointed out to them sat. In an instant, both could see a very happy and animated conversation going on. Georg and Wellington looked at each other and laughed, both knowing how affable Bethleann could be on almost any occasion. What long lost friends had she unearthed now was the question on both their minds.

"No matter," spoke aloud Wellington, "we know it will be a new adventure for everyone if Bethleann is involved!" Georg could only nod. He was still eating his way through the tray of tasty tarts.

Before Georg could decide which tart to eat next, Bethleann was back at their table with the two rabbits in tow. "Guys, you'll never guess who turned up here in Willis Warren." And then without waiting for anyone to say a word, she proudly beamed, "My dear friend, Velveteen Rabbit, but you can call him Vel like I do. And his lady friend, Golden. Isn't this just fabulous?"

"My stars, this is quite an honor," replied Wellington. "Sit, sit and have a spot of tea with us," and as he spoke he was scooting his chair over and indicating to Georg to do the same. Georg signaled to Miss Hilarey to please bring more tea and another platter of those fabulous tarts.

Bethleann was so excited she could hardly sit. "Vel and I have not seen each other in ages. He and Golden are here looking for you, Wellington."

"Moi?" asked Wellington, slipping into a bit of French.

"Ah, yes," replied Velveteen, all the while seeing that Golden was comfortably seated and then settling himself in a chair next to Wellington. "Golden and I have heard of your tremendous misfortune and are here to offer our services."

"Misfortune?" asked Wellington.

"Well, actually, the misfortune of Georg, the most famous magic bear in magic circles of the north, better known there as Wise Bear of the Deep Taiga." At Velveteen's comment, Georg looked down in embarrassment.

Wellington and Bethleann looked hard at Georg, "Georg, what have you been keeping from us?"

"Not much," he mumbled in confusion. He was trying very hard to reason out to what misfortune the rabbit was referring. He did not want to embarrass Velveteen and Golden by calling them both daft, but darned if he could figure what they were talking about. And he was rather reticent about anyone outside the taiga knowing of his fame there. He was not ashamed about it, just plain shy.

Of course Bethleann and Wellington knew he was a very good magician, but, truth be told, they knew very, very little of how highly he was revered in the taiga for his complicated

magic shows and stellar entertainment. Part of the reason, aside from the fact that he was very good at magic, that his shows were so popular was that he only put them on when the spirits told him the time was right. Sometimes years could go by without a Wise Bear of the Deep Taiga show. And so when one was scheduled, everyone within shouting distance and beyond attended. One day he would invite Wellington and Bethleann, but not just yet.

“What misfortune rests on Georg?” asked Wellington of Velveten and Golden. “We have not heard of this. Georg?” he turned an inquiring glance Georg’s way.

Georg shook his head. He still could not think of anything troubling in his life.

“My good bear!” exclaimed Velveten. “Has it been that long, you have forgotten your great loss?”

Golden gently touched her friend on the arm, “Perhaps, Vel, it is not such a great loss after all,” she suggested.

“Well, I must admit that I would hardly miss the thing myself,” laughed Velveten. “I have a few to spare.”

Golden smiled at his comment, “Quite true enough.”

“Can you please tell us what you are talking about,” begged Bethleann. “Georg is clueless and Wellington and I are dying to know the answer.”

“Well, as we are great finders of lost things,” began Velveten.

“We thought we would help Georg,” continued Golden. Suddenly there was a tremendous crash from the kitchen.

All five members of the tea party leapt up to see what had happened. They rushed in rapid succession through the huge swinging door that separated the kitchen from the dining room. The scene they came upon was one of broken plates and teacups where the huge tray laden with fresh tea delights for their table had tumbled to the floor. Miss Hilarey was beside herself. “I didn’t see him coming,” she fumed. “He just dashed into sight and caught me by surprise. He flicked a huge fluffy tail in my face and I couldn’t see where I was going. He upset my entire tea tray!”

“There, there,” soothed Wellington. “We’ll have this cleaned up in a jiff. And look, Mr Culper is already fixing a new tray of tarts. No harm done.”

Miss Hilarey looked up with fury in her eyes. “No harm done? That dratted cat best stay out of my way. If I ever see the likes of him in this kitchen again, he won’t have a fluffy tail to flick around.”

“Cat?” asked Georg. “What kind of cat?”

“A furry cat,” she replied, “with a big tail and, and...big eyes. Yes, that’s it. Eyes that, well, glinted scary-like, although I didn’t see much of them. That tail was the thing.”

“Hmmm...” said Georg.

“It sounds like the Cheshire Cat,” replied Wellington, speaking what Georg dared not.

“The Cheshire Cat?” replied Bethleann. “You mean the one that...”

“Yes, the one that took my e,” growled Georg.

“There, I told you,” said Velveten, “that’s precisely the misfortune I’m talking about. I knew you would remember and surely must be sorely missing the thing.”

“Come along, Golden, we’ve not a moment to lose. Cheshire Cat you say? It figures that one would be in this somehow. He’s always causing some kind of trouble.” Velveteen reached for Golden’s arm and headed for the back door.

“Sorry we cannot stay for tea with you,” Golden looked toward Bethleann. “But we must follow the trail while it is fresh. We’ll have your e in no time, Georg. Vel is the best tracker of lost items I have ever worked with.”

Before a word could be spoken from any of the three, Velveteen and Golden were out the door and down the path.

“Well, I’ll be,” said Wellington as the two rabbits disappeared from sight.



Chapter 3

What to Make of That

“Well, I’ll be!” said Wellington again. “This is, umm, great news, Georg, right ol’ pal?” Wellington was truly not sure how Georg would take to this new turn of events.

“I’ll say it is,” said Georg. “I can hardly believe it,” he grinned. “I would not know where to begin to look for that cat. Even my magic is not good enough to take on that creature, for very long, anyway.”

“That did not seem to faze Vel and Golden at all,” said Bethleann. She wondered to herself why she had never thought to go looking for Georg’s e. She figured her level five magic would be sufficient to tackle anything the Cheshire Cat could throw at her.

“They’re quite the pair,” nodded Wellington. “I shall look forward to a more leisurely visit with them upon their return. Well, shall we get back to work?”

He and Georg headed for their table.

“I’ll help finish this cleanup and be right there,” replied Bethleann. She offered to scoot the last bits of broken shards into the trash while Miss Hilarey finished getting their replacement tea tray ready. “Do you have a dust pan?” she asked.

“In the pantry,” said Miss Hilarey, pointing to a doorway in the corner. Bethleann leaned the broom against the wall and went to fetch the dustpan. The pantry was chock full of all sorts of canned goods and spices. Numerous wooden boxes of wonderfully smelling fresh vegetables and fruits lined one whole wall. “Wow, I could do some cooking with these supplies,” Bethleann mused, looking all around the brimming room. “Maybe Mr Culper will let me be guest chef one day.” She ran her hand over the spices, studying the labels. Some were very familiar, some were new to her. She had no idea what they did; she would have to ask. “New recipes,” she laughed, “Wellington and Georg are in for some surprise treats soon.”

Remembering her task, Bethleann glanced around again, this time looking for the dustpan. She spied it hanging on the wall, just to the left of the doorway. She reached for the handle and turned to leave, all in the same motion. In the process, her foot became tangled in something on the floor and she felt herself tumbling forward. She tried to drop the dustpan so she could catch herself with two hands but she fell too fast. She had no time to think beyond catching her fall and so landed with the flat of the dustpan taking the brunt of the fall. At that, a hole opened in the floor exactly where the dustpan crashed, and momentum rolled Bethleann forward through it.

“Help!” she cried as she tumbled forward into a dark tunnel. Over and over and over she tumbled. “Oh help, I’m getting so dizzy.” The floor above was fast disappearing. She could no longer see the hole she had fallen through. In fact, light was disappearing fast, too. She felt herself getting slightly sick to her stomach and wished for the falling to end. The complete darkness of the tunnel only served to add to her disoriented state. She fought to keep her stomach still. “Quiet, it’s only a silly fall after all. Quiet now I say,” she ordered her stomach.

Slowly Bethleann felt the tumbling subside and she began to sway back and forth instead of tumbling on and on. She likened it to the feeling of being in a gently rocking hammock. This was much better for her stomach. She looked around but it was still too dark to see anything. She was falling slower and slower. "Small wonder," she muttered. She felt at her hand that held the dustpan. No longer a dustpan, it had turned into an umbrella and was checking her descent to a much more respectable speed. Still she floated down and down until she thought she would never stop.

"Why, this must have been exactly how Alice felt when she fell down the rabbit hole. I certainly seem to have an attraction to her story." Bethleann was referring to another time she had fallen down a dark tunnel and, finally after a few twists and turns, ended up in, of all places, Black Veil's magical meadow. That adventure brought little bunny into the fold, but Bethleann had no more time to reflect on past adventures today; she felt herself coming to a stop.

Her legs touched down onto a smooth surface. It was still very dark and she could not see anything at all. "I wonder if this umbrella acts like a bumbershoot," she said, pulling it closed. "They are, after all, very similar," she said to herself, as there was no one else to talk to and she liked the idea of carrying on a chat with herself ever so much more than enduring all this silence in which she found herself.

"Now then," she spoke, twisting the handle of the umbrella, which did indeed light up exactly the same as a bumbershoot. "That's much better." She breathed a sigh of relief. The darkness had been rather tedious. Bethleann looked around the room that she found herself in. "This is too bizarre," she giggled.

There was a table with a small bottle on top. "And a little key," she whispered. "I really am in Alice's story. I wonder where the White Rabbit is. Perhaps, if I sip from the bottle on the table, I will shrink just like Alice and can then fit through the door that tiny key must open. Let's see now, Alice found the door behind a curtain, I think." Bethleann began walking around and examining the room more carefully.

There were heavy draperies that hung from floor to ceiling on two of the walls. "Huh?" cried Bethleann, alarmed at her own observation. "Draperies do not normally hang from floor to ceiling. But then maybe they do here. Or maybe I am upside down. Maybe I was falling up all that time instead of down. It felt like I was falling down though," she continued to talk to herself out loud. She leaned her head way over to one side and tried to look at the room from a semi-upside down perspective. "That does not look right, either," she said. "Maybe the liquid in the bottle will help me like it helped Alice. Well, sort of helped her." She walked back over to the table.

"Not so fast, my dear," purred a voice. "This is not the story of Alice as you seem to think. This is the story of Bethleann and how she put her nose in a place where it did not belong. And how much trouble that caused her."

"Who is that talking? Cat, is that you?" cried Bethleann whirling around in every direction but seeing no one.

"And who else would be purring in your ear, dear?" meowed the voice.

"Why how would I know?" asked Bethleann, pulling herself up tall as she struggled to keep her composure. "You could be any sort of creature at all, even that evil rabbit Black Veil."

“Not on your life, dearie,” chuckled the voice. “I am much more powerful than any silly rabbit.”

“Is that so?” challenged Bethleann. “Prove it.”

“Oh so boring,” yawned the voice. “Very well, I have nothing better to do at the moment. I possess something you and your friends seek. Would you like to see it?”

“Maybe,” said Bethleann sensing a trap of some sort.

“Well, answer up. Maybe won’t do it. Yes or no?” snapped the voice.

Bethleann thought for a moment. Of course she wanted to see what this creature had, but on her own terms, not its. “How can I know if you are real? Show yourself first and then I will answer.”

“You are much smarter than you appear,” mused the voice. “Of course, that is small matter to me. I can manage anyone or anything, therefore I will humor you.” A cat form began to appear on the table. A calico cat with a huge grin and a large striped tail, which the cat purposefully curled tightly around the little bottle.



Chapter 4 Cheshire Cat

“You are a despicable creature,” cried Bethleann. “Give me that bottle!” she demanded, forgetting all about anything else. She reached for the bottle.

“Tsk, tsk, dearie, it does not pay to be greedy,” purred the cat, curling his tail more tightly around the bottle. “This bottle will actually only get you in worse trouble. You do remember all of Alice’s trials when she tried to eat or drink anything, don’t you?”

The mention of food made Bethleann’s stomach growl. Suddenly she was famished. She began searching in her pockets for a remnant of something edible.

“Lose something, dearie?” wondered the cat, licking its whiskers.

“Well, if I did, surely you would have it,” came the tart reply.

“Now, now, sarcasm does not become you at all. Perhaps you are looking for this.” He waved one of his big paws and the table became filled with all sorts of snack foods.

There were party sized pimento cheese sandwiches and tuna salad ones. There were miniature muffins and scones. A blue plate held cubes of yellow and white cheeses. Beside that was a basket of small round sesame crackers. Tiny spinach and cheese quiches filled a deep bowl. Another basket housed fresh petite bananas, peaches, apples and mangoes. And the *piece de resistance*, a pot of steaming hot chocolate sat beside the cat. Bethleann’s mouth watered. She looked at the cat, bewildered. What he was up to she could not help but wonder.

“I am not entirely bad,” grinned the cat, suspecting her question before she voiced it. “And I do enjoy a stimulating conversation. You impress me. I thought we might enjoy a repast and have a chat.” He waved a paw and a cozy chair appeared beside the table. “Do sit, my dear.”

Bethleann sank into the chair. She was very tired and very hungry. The fall, up or down, whichever it was, had lasted a long, long time. The cat poured two mugs of hot chocolate and slid one over toward Bethleann. She picked it up and began gratefully sipping the warm liquid. That is after she plopped two pink marshmallows from a silver bowl that sat beside the chocolate pot into her mug. Marshmallows just made hot chocolate the completely best drink ever. Without marshmallows, it was delicious, but with, well, nothing was any better.

“You want me to chat with you, cat?” she asked wearily. She stifled a yawn. “My, this chair is comfy,” she thought, snuggling down deeper into its cushions. She pulled the throw draped across the arm onto her legs that she had tucked up under herself. She put down her hot chocolate and reached for a sandwich.

“Call me Chessie, dear,” replied the cat, nibbling on a tuna sandwich. “Like I said, I find you intriguing. You are much more fascinating than those rabbits you insist on befriending. Really, I do not understand what you see in those silly creatures, nor do I understand your attraction to that filthy bear.”

“Georg is not filthy!” snapped Bethleann, sitting upright.

“I heard he was always getting tangled in briar patches,” suggested the cat.

“Once, just once,” returned Bethleann. “And it was not his fault. Why are you picking on Georg? And speaking of Georg, why on earth did you take his e? What could you possibly want with it?”

The cat licked its whiskers. “Who wouldn’t want an e, girl? They are very in. And I love seeing that bear squirm. He has such hubris about him.”

“You stop picking on Georg. He is the nicest bear I know.”

“Well, it’s plain to see you don’t get around very much,” grinned the cat. “He is like that Edward Pooh, a bear with very little brain.”

Bethleann did not like the direction of this conversation at all. “Cat,” (she refused to say Chessie), “I thought you wanted to talk. Running on about Georg is name calling, not talking.”

“You started it,” said the cat, “taking offense at my tiny little comment about your choice of friends. Really, girl, you can do much better. You should come with me to the English Speaking Society sometime. Now there’s a stellar group.” The cat got up, turned around, and vanished.

“Well, I never,” declared Bethleann. “That cat comes and goes with such abruptness. First, he says he will show me a treasure. Then he says he wants to chat with me. Then he insults my friends, and when that gets him nowhere he just leaves.”

She nibbled on a muffin. “Well, at least he put out a good spread, even if the conversation was vapid and pointless. Why, he doesn’t know the least thing about good conversation,” she grumbled as she finished her chocolate.

She looked around for the little mystery bottle but apparently the cat’s tail had whisked it away. Nor was the key anywhere on the table. She looked everywhere, under each dish and bowl. “This is a fine pickle,” sniffed Bethleann, beginning to cry.

“Oh drat,” she sniffed, tears streaming down her cheeks, “this very thing happened in the Alice story!” Bethleann became alarmed. She tried to stop crying, but the tears just flowed and flowed. Soon the floor was awash in a rapidly deepening puddle. “Well, at least I didn’t get to drink the contents of the mystery bottle and shrink down, or would it be up, to almost nothing. Then I would really be in a fine mess, in my own sea of tears exactly like Alice.”

No sooner had she muttered these words than she began to feel herself closing up just like one of those collapsible drinking cups that Sir Donald Cardinal was so fond of carrying around in his travel pouch. At Wellington’s last party, he had shown his latest addition to his extensive collection, a blue one made of tempered eggshell. At the time, she found the idea of collecting collapsing cups mostly boring, but what would she give now to be right by Sir Donald’s side as he explained his latest find!

Smaller and smaller she became. Fortunately, she was still sitting in the chair, but something about the chair felt different. The seat felt hard, not the least bit cushy. Her umbrella, which she had faithfully kept by her side, began growing taller. “It’s as though everything is making itself into a boat,” cried Bethleann. As she was still shrinking, although not nearly so fast any more, she quickly pushed the lap robe under her before she became smothered in it. It made a nice cushion. And she snatched a pimento sandwich from the table. Fortunately, she selected a smaller one, at that it was almost too heavy to manage. She really wanted the hot chocolate but she was now too small to handle the big pot. She looked at it wistfully and sighed.

Her theory about the chair becoming a boat was proving to be exactly right. She looked about in fascination as the umbrella affixed itself by the crook of its handle to the chair seat which was looking more and more like the bottom of a boat and less and less like a seat. Next, the umbrella spread out its fine silk covering. Then it engaged the tilting mechanism located near the top of the handle that enabled the silk to be at the ready to catch any fine breeze that might happen along. The little boat rocked and tossed about in the sea of tears for a moment and then jerkily sailed away from the island table.



Chapter 5

A Recitation

“Whatever is taking Bethleann so long?” said Georg. “We’ll never get done.” He yawned, quite ready for a nap. “Maybe I’ll just amble on home and let you two tidy up your part. You don’t need me for that.”

“But we like to have your advice,” said Wellington. “Bethleann should be finished any minute now. Here, have another cup of tea and tell me about your deliveries last spring again. I love that story about how you found a poem rolled up and tied with a silk ribbon, tucked into a rabbit hole smack dab in the middle of your favorite wish flower field. Surely the poem was about our wish flowers.”

“You mean the Tennyson poem?” asked Georg. “I actually had tea with his greatest-great grandson last summer while I was on one of my roam-about. You know, the one I took while you and Bethleann went to the seashore. Ugh, how anyone could like the seashore, all that sand and hot air. Not for me. Give me a mountain hike any day. Now where was I? Oh yes, the poem...” Georg rambled on.

This made Wellington smile. Georg was such a good sport. Wellington knew that Georg would even go to the seashore with the gang if they asked him to. Wellington certainly hoped Vel and Golden success in their quest to retrieve Georg’s missing e.

“Wellington, are you listening to me? Tennyson named that poem *Flower in the Crannied Wall*. And did you know that Frank Lloyd Wright co-created a sculpture he named after the poem? It was for the house that famous architect built in 1904 for Illinois socialite, Susan Dana, to display her vast art collection. I read all about it in an art history book. Such a simple poem yet so exquisitely beautiful. I know, let me recite it for you.” Georg stood up and took a deep breath. “Flower...” he cleared his throat, “Flower...” he started and stopped again.

“That’s okay, Georg,” said Wellington. “I would love to hear it, but you can recite it for me another time.” Wellington could tell Georg was nervous.

“No, no, I’ve got it,” stammered Georg. He was not going to let reciting one of his favorite poems in public get the best of him. After all, it was a small public. There were only a couple of other folks having afternoon tea in the inn. He put his paws on the table and pressed himself upright with one strong heave.

“*Flower in the Crannied Wall* by Alfred Lord Tennyson,” Georg was proud to remember to credit the author. He had flubbed that very thing during a school recitation once and his teacher was sorely disappointed. True, he was a very young bear then, only in his middle school years, but never again would he make such a callous mistake. Especially since his best friend at the time, Yogii, had remembered that fine detail and gotten an A++ on the project. It was not so much that he minded Yogii getting the better grade. But Georg really wished he had remembered to cite the poem’s creator, too. Georg cleared his throat and continued with the main body of the poem. His voice rang out loud and clear. He loved this poem:

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand
Little flower – but if I could understand
What you all, root and all, and all in all
I should know what God and man is.

“There, I did it.” Georg sank into his chair; he was sweating, a lot. He eased back into the chair and wiped his brow.

And then it began, slowly at first and then with increasing intensity. Applause, applause, applause! Georg looked around in amazement. Where had all these folks come from? The room was practically full and everyone was clapping and clapping.

Again,” someone shouted.

“Encore,” came another voice.

“Bravo,” a third called out, and then there was more clapping. They would not stop. Georg looked at Wellington. Wellington was grinning from ear to ear. It was so good to see Georg warmly accepted by everyone around. They did not seem to care in the least that he was a huge bear, and much, much larger than any of them. Maybe now Georg could drop the invisibility cloak he used to keep a low profile so as not to scare any of the smaller creatures, particularly the rabbit neighbors that made up the general population of Willis Warren.

“Who are these folk?” whispered Georg. “The place was empty when I started. Good thing it was not a long poem!” he laughed. “There would be no more room in the inn,” he chuckled. Tears welled in his big eyes, “They like me, they really like me.” He glowed with contentment.

“It is a warm day. Mr Culper has the doors and windows open,” replied Wellington. “Passersby heard your voice and stopped in to see and hear. Even the woodland creatures, usually quite shy by nature, ventured forth to listen to your wonderful words.” Georg could hardly hear what Wellington was saying above the din. The crowd wanted more and they would not be satisfied until Georg gave it to them.

“Thank you, thank you,” Georg raised an arm to acknowledge their accolades. He wondered what else he could recite. He searched his memory. “Stall ’em, Wellington,” he begged. “I’m trying to gather my wits.”

“Hear, hear,” Wellington stood up. He realized that no one was paying attention to him. He stood on his chair and then hopped to the table. “Hear, hear,” he boomed in his best loud voice, the one he reserved for encounters with Black Veil. The chatter began to subside. “Let me tell you a bit about my dear friend here while he catches his breath. He will have more entertainment for you shortly. Meanwhile find a chair and order some tea and tarts. If you’ve not tried them before you’re in for a real treat. They are the best anywhere!”

Then Wellington went on to tell the story of Georg, but he made it brief because he knew everyone wanted to hear another recitation. Of course, he left out the magic bear parts and all references to Easter deliveries. He told how Georg was an accomplished poet in his own right. He told how he had met Georg in the briar patch, explaining that the tangle was simply a

consequence of Georg taking a wrong turn or two during a spring roam-about. Rabbits certainly knew all the pleasures and pitfalls of bound-about and so accepted the story easily enough.

Wellington took a breath and looked at Georg. Georg nodded. "And now without further ado," Wellington paused, "I present to you Willis Warren's own newly proclaimed, by acclamation, poet laureate Georg Bear." Wellington began clapping and everyone instantly joined in. As before, they clapped and clapped. They were delighted to have their very own resident poet. It was official; Georg was poet laureate of Willis Warren. No more invisibility for him; he was a beloved member of the community.

George stood up quickly this time, his confidence soaring. He was a poet laureate just like Tennyson! "Thank you kindly. I proudly accept the title. With Mr Culper's permission, we shall have monthly readings here at the Doggone Tea Room. All poets are welcome to share their talents." This announcement brought yet another round of thunderous applause. Georg was going to fit in just fine.



Chapter 6

Something Amiss

“My voice has flavor for one more poem today,” said Georg. “This one ’twas always a favorite of my mum, rest her soul. She recited these very words to me time and again when I was a wee cub.” Georg began, “*Abou Ben Adhem* by James Leigh Hunt,” he paused to look around the room. Every eye was riveted on him. He continued:

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,
An Angel writing in a book of gold:

Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
And to the Presence in the room he said,
“What writest thou?” The Vision raised its head,
And with a look made of all sweet accord
Answered, “The names of those who love the Lord.”

“And is mine one?” said Abou. “Nay, not so,”
Replied the Angel. Abou spoke more low,
But cheerily still; and said, “I pray thee, then,
Write me as one who loves his fellow men.”

The Angel wrote, and vanished. The next night
It came again with a great wakening light,
And showed the names whom love of God had blessed,
And, lo! Ben Adhem’s name led all the rest!

Georg sat down. The room was completely silent for a long, long moment. And then everyone began to clap and everyone stood up and hugged their neighbors, each and every one. There was such love in the room that day at the Doggone that everyone felt full and rich for days to come.

“Your mum sure had it right, Georg,” a gentlemanly rabbit said after the hugging had wound its way around the room and back again. “Those two poems are pure enough for the Easter Bunny to embrace.”

Wellington and Georg exchanged a quick glance. They could readily see the rabbit was sincere; he was not fishing in the least. “Perhaps, that will happen sooner than you think,” muttered Georg, trying hard to keep a serious face. He could not even look again at Wellington

for fear of breaking up laughing. If that well-intended rabbit only knew the half of it. My goodness, secrets were difficult to keep.

As Georg's second poem was somewhat longer than the first, all the guests had ample time to finish the tea and tarts and quickly set out for home, their bellies full and their spirits overflowing.

Wellington and Georg breathed a sigh of contentment. "That was some reading, Georg," declared Wellington. "Your encore selection was right on target."

"Thanks to my mum," bragged Georg. "She could deliver a moving poem herself and quite often did, being president of her local poetry society. And was she ever a reader. She taught me to love reading. And it has always served me well. 'Reading can take you anywhere you want to go, laddie,' she would say to me. She was right. I've been on some fine adventures without leaving my armchair."

Georg stretched out his legs and raised his mammoth arms above his head in a big stretch. "It's going to be so good to not worry about invisibility anymore," he chuckled. "I'll save it for evading overzealous fans. And since I don't really think I am going to have any of those, I am set to be an ordinary citizen of Willis Warren."

"Citizen, yes. Ordinary, no, Georg," said Wellington. "You are anything but ordinary. I was wondering if you would consider dropping invisibility. That thought occurred to me instantly when I saw how everyone looked right past your size. Evidently, you noticed too. We have possibly been worrying all this time over nothing!"

"Well, maybe," said Georg. "But I sort of think the poetry was the real key. The arts can bring an eclectic blend of people together."

"True," said Wellington. "Now where could that Bethleann be? She missed your entire reading."

"Maybe she listened from the kitchen," suggested Georg.

"Maybe, but where is she now? I'll go see if she is singing your praises to Mr Culper." He got up and scurried to the kitchen. Georg poured a cup of hard-earned tea and lifted the last tart from the tray. It would never do to leave it lingering lonely and alone.

"Has anyone seen Bethleann?" Wellington entered the kitchen. There was a lot of dishwashing going on. The fine china used for tea could not be run through any dishwasher. Wellington picked up a clean cloth to help dry.

"Why, no," said Miss Hilarey, "not since she...hmmm...let's see. That's right," she said, retracing Bethleann's steps to herself. "She asked for a dustpan and I sent her to the pantry. I think she came back and finished cleaning up the last glass shards. But it was about then that the inn started getting crowded with folks wanting to hear Mr. Georg," she went on, "and I really am not entirely sure," she looked apologetic at Wellington. "Sorry."

"That's okay," said Wellington, totally mystified as to where Bethleann could be. It was not like her at all to just leave without a fare thee well.

"Then as you know," Miss Hilarey went on, "we got real busy in the kitchen." She grinned widely. "My goodness, those folks can do some eating. Mr Culper has a bag of coins to take to the bank tonight!"

Wellington nodded his acknowledgement. “I did see plenty of new faces in the crowd today and I’m sure that they will be back time and again for all the delicious treats Doggone Tea Room & Inn has to offer.”

Georg had gotten tired of waiting for Wellington and had come into the kitchen to see what was holding him up. Seeing that Wellington and Miss Hilarey were deep in a discussion about all the new customers, he slipped over to the pantry to see if anything was amiss there. He had barely stepped past the doorframe when he knew something was not right. “Wellington, come here quickly,” Georg boomed.

Both Wellington and Miss Hilarey ran toward the pantry, Wellington flinging the drying cloth aside as he ran.



Chapter 7

The Search Begins

“Vel, where should we start looking for the Cheshire Cat?” asked Golden as they hurried down the path. Velveteen did not answer immediately, but this did not worry Golden. She was used to her rabbit friend’s reflective moods.

Soon they came to a little train station. A small train had just pulled to a stop. “Shall we be taking a train?” she asked. She looked around her; there were no other folks to be seen. Not even a conductor.

Velveteen turned to her and smiled, “Indeed we shall. Now gather your skirts so they will not get caught on the steps and let’s get on.”

Golden and Velveteen boarded the train and settled into two of the coach chairs. It was a very nice coach. The seats were made of soft cloth and soon Golden drifted off into a lovely slumber.

Much later, she awoke with a start. “My stars, I must have fallen asleep before we even left the station.” She looked over at Velveteen. He was on a nap journey of his own. Golden was getting a little hungry and she hoped Vel would not sleep too much longer.

And true to her wish, not a minute later Velveteen began to stir. “Ah, that was a fine nap. How was your rest, Golden?”

“Most delightful,” she replied. “I am a bit hungry now. Do you suppose this train has a dining car?”

“I feel that it must. Let us go see,” Velveteen rose and offered his arm to Golden. They tried to steady themselves against the natural jerking of the train, but the best they could manage was a dignified sway to the end of their car and through the pneumatic doors to the next. In this car, there were a few passengers. They were either reading, sleeping, or gazing out the window at the passing countryside landscape. Velveteen and Golden swayed on through toward the next car.

Even as they stepped across the platform that joined the two cars, they could hear the tinkling of china and silver, and smell good things to eat. “I do believe we are in luck,” said Velveteen.

“I am famished,” returned Golden. “Everything smells so good.” They entered the dining car and immediately the *maitre d’* came forward to offer them a table for two near the middle of the car.

“Let’s see,” mused Velveteen as he regarded the menu. “I am quite tempted by the crab cakes, but then a shepherd’s pie is never wrong.”

“I will start with a nice green salad,” said Golden. “And I do believe you are right, shepherd’s pie is always right.”

The waiter brought two frosted glasses of ice water flavored with a lemon wedge, and Velveteen, being as hungry as Golden, immediately placed two orders for a garden green salad and shepherd’s pie. “And bring us an appetizer of Brie cheese with fruits, *s’il vous plait*,” he called

after the efficient waiter who had wasted no time in heading for the kitchen to place the order for the starving travelers.

“Now, Golden, you have been very patient with my silence, so let me explain why we are on this train.” Golden looked at Velveten expectantly. “It is my theory that the Cheshire Cat is a train aficionado.”

Just then, a loud toot-toot from the train whistle sounded indicating they were entering a tunnel.

Golden laughed, “Well, he is as slick as a train whistle.”

“And he is famous for coming and going,” said Velveten, “with awesome speed, I might add.”

“And why...” Golden spoke the thought as it popped into her head, “he has calico markings and loves to be called Chessie. Just like that adorable kitten that made the C&O Railroad highly popular for years and years!”

“I knew you would see where I was coming from,” said Velveten. “That is why we are such a great team. Conversation is only a verification point. We already know what the other is thinking.”

Golden grinned. It was so easy to like this guy. He was so down to earth and real. She picked up an apple slice and scooped up a bite of the warm melted Brie cheese their waiter had just put down between them. He refilled their water glasses and went to check on the rest of their order. “So now what?”

“I am not entirely sure,” said Velveten. “I think we stay on this line until something stirs us otherwise. Look for any unusual activity, and meanwhile, enjoy our delightful ride.” Suddenly the train began to bump and rumble along as though it had hit a very rough place on the track.

Velveten and Golden grabbed their water glasses before any could spill but watched helplessly as the Brie plate crashed to the floor. “What on earth is happening?” questioned Velveten. The train continued to bump and thump along. All the diners clung to their tables and whatever parts of their dinner they could salvage.

The waiter appeared in the kitchen doorway, “No alarm, folks,” he called out. “Happens a lot. We’re in for sort of a rough spot but it will smooth out shortly. Stay calm and I’ll bring your food when the ride settles down.”

“Happens a lot!” exclaimed Golden. “How very odd.” She looked out the window and gasped. “Vel, we have left the tracks.”

Velveten looked and saw that the train was traveling across a meadow. And right alongside the train was a horse. The horse appeared to be racing the train, or perhaps the train was racing the horse. “This is most preposterous,” he said. “Very uncouth activity for a civilized train, frolicking through a meadow with a horse.”

Golden could only nod her head. The train was going quite fast and she was alarmed that they might overturn. Beautiful buttercups flashed by, but she could not enjoy them one bit. And the horse was quite stunning, an Arabian, but she could not appreciate his beauty either.

“This is evidently the wrong train,” decided Velveten. “The Cheshire Cat would never condescend to ride such a troublesome rail line. We must get off as soon as it is safe.” Golden could not have agreed more.

“Toot! Toot!” the train and the horse were neck and neck. The riverbank loomed ahead. Who would win? No one cared but the two racers. And then the race was over, both had reached the edge of the meadow at the same time. A tie!

The train tooted to his friend the horse and hopped back onto the track that evidently had made a great curve that the train could not follow and have a chance at beating the horse. So the freethinking train had chosen to abandon the track and the comfort of his passengers to race the horse directly across the meadow. “This train needs to learn some manners,” huffed Velveteen as he paid the waiter.

The waiter glumly replied, “We are working on that, sir. Believe me. Please do excuse the inconvenience Tootle caused you. He does mean well. He is a rather young train and will do better when he is older.”

“I am sure he will,” soothed Golden, “but we must depart at the next station. This train is not the one we are looking for.” The two rabbits left the dining car still hungry, but that could not be helped. They had lost a lot of time already, chasing that cat on the wrong train.



Chapter 8 A Detour

“I have never completely understood the follies of youth,” declared Golden as they watched Tootle head off to his next stop; on the tracks for the moment, but who knew for how long. “But they do seem to survive in spite of themselves.”

“Well, I suppose you are right, Golden. He is a young train. He will do better with age,” said Velveteen. “Are you okay?” he looked at Golden.

“I do believe so. I’m still famished though. How about you?”

“Same here. Perhaps the next train will be along before much longer. There seems to be no place to eat here.” They both looked around the station. It was even smaller than the one where they had boarded Tootle. It was clear to tell that this was a country stop that was probably not even used that much.

“Hullo there,” came a voice from behind them. “If you are looking for a train, you’ve got a long wait.”

Velveteen and Golden whirled around together to face a gentleman cricket.

“Mr. E at your service,” said the cricket bowing low.

The two rabbits stared at the cricket for a moment, trying to figure out exactly where he had come from. Then Velveteen spoke, “I am Velveteen Rabbit and this lovely lady is my friend, Golden. Do you know of any place to eat around here if our wait is to be that lengthy?”

“Oh no, you are deep in the country. I myself was flying in on a mission. My country estate is nearby. I saw you get off that odd little train. I figured you were lost, as no one gets off here that does not live here. Well, we do have the occasional visitors that travel here by train, but they are always expected, you see,” said Mr. E as he shook some water droplets off his aviator’s cap. “Condensation is always an in-flight problem. Name’s actually Edward Edward but Mr. E is what I go by.”

Golden and Velveteen just stared at the chatty gent. They were still quite hungry and neither had all their wits about them. It was turning into a very long day and it was not over yet.

“Come, come, I insist that you come home with me for tea, surely you must be starving. It is just over the hill. I will fly on and bring a buggy back for you to ride in. The next train is not due until late afternoon.”

Velveteen and Golden nodded their assent. “Thank you, that would be most kind. We do accept,” said Velveteen, returning Mr. E’s bow.

With that, Mr. E took flight and before they could blink, he was over the hill. “This certainly is fortuitous,” said Velveteen. “I am more than hungry.”

“Oh, I do believe Mr. E saved us from a terribly long afternoon,” said Golden. “We would have been wilted rabbits by the time the next train came along.” Just then, a smart looking buggy appeared on the hill and descended toward the station. Mr. E was at the reins. He pulled the vehicle to a stop beside the rabbits and they gratefully got in and sat down.

And then they were off at a fast clip. Golden held onto her hat with one hand and the back of Mr. E's seat with the other. Up and over the steep hill they flew. The fields on either side were abloom with clovers, buttercups and all manner of spring wildflowers. Golden supposed that she and Velveteen would not have actually starved. They could have grazed in the fields, but both preferred a prepared meal to one in the wild.

The riders cleared the rise and just beyond and off to the left a bit stood a sturdy looking white clapboard house surrounded by shade trees. Mr. E guided the buggy down the lane toward it. There was a small barn to the side and located at a right angle to the house. It was nicely settled in a little comfortable slope. There was a fine looking fruit orchard to the side of that. Mr. E drove to the barn door and stopped to let his passengers alight. He unhitched the pony and saw to it that he had plenty of fresh water and oats in his stall.

"Come along now," he signaled to Velveteen and Golden who had been wandering in the lovely orchard while Mr. E finished the chore. "Let's eat. I am starving. I left the taiga early this morning and only had a light breakfast."

"You flew all the way from the taiga?" asked Velveteen.

"Well, yes. It really is an easy trip if you catch the jet stream. And I simply must find that rascal Georg Bear as soon as possible."

"Georg Bear?" gasped Velveteen and Golden in one single exclamation.

"Georg Bear from the taiga?" added Velveteen.

"Tall black bear, accomplished magician, known throughout the taiga as Wise Bear of the Deep Taiga. Friends with a rabbit called Wellington?" listed Mr. E.

"Yes!" said Golden. "We too are searching for Georg. Or rather, for Georg, not for Georg."

"What Golden means," laughed Velveteen, "is that we are helping Georg. We are looking for his lost e. What is your business with him? Why do you think he is a rascal?"

Mr. E chuckled, "Georg is not a real rascal. He is just extremely late for a meeting with his mentor, Sir Boris Bear. I came to fetch Georg several years ago and at the time, we got side tracked. Helping Wellington, in fact. Consequently, by the time all of that was resolved the problem Sir Boris faced was no longer of any importance. But now it has surfaced again and he needs Georg with all urgency."

Velveteen and Golden looked at each other. Was their meal to be delayed yet again? "But not so urgent that we cannot eat first," said Mr. E as he headed for the kitchen. The two rabbits looked very relieved. They followed along to help out. "How about a stuffy sandwich?" suggested Mr. E.

Golden looked puzzled. "A pocket bread stuffed with all sorts of salad fixings, topped off with a bit of cheese and light dressing," Mr. E replied to her look. "Discovered on one of my travels," he finished explaining.

"Absolutely perfect," said Velveteen. "I will chop the salad." He began gathering things from the icebox and lining them up on the butcher-block table.

"I can make a fruit salad with a sweet-tart dressing to go with," said Golden, "if you have an egg and a bit of butter and vinegar. I will need a little heat, too." Mr. E directed her to the

hen house to get a fresh egg. Meanwhile he sliced some cheese for the sandwiches, cut a block of butter for Golden's recipe, and located the vinegar cruet.

Golden returned with two very nice warm eggs. "Here is a breakfast egg for you," she offered Mr. E.

"Much obliged," he replied. "The stove fire should be just about right. The sauce pan is just there," he pointed to a happy yellow pan just the right size for cooking the dressing in. "I'll chop the fruits for you." Golden smiled her consent. What a merry kitchen it was.

As they worked, Velveteen and Golden explained how they came to be searching for Georg's e. And Velveteen told the story of how he became real. Golden related how she was the great grand-rabbit of the Gold Shoe Easter Bunny, a humble ordinary cottontail country bunny who became an Easter helper for Grandfather Bunny long before the WEB was created.

Mr. E was truly impressed to be in the company of two amazing and legendary rabbits. Why, they looked so ordinary!

Velveteen put all of the vegetables in small bowls and sliced the pocket bread into halves. These he put into a towel and placed it on the back of the stove so the bread could warm up.

"My dressing is ready," called Golden as she stirred it to a cool state away from the heat. "It doesn't take long to cook, or cool to an edible temperature." She spooned the warm dressing over the fruit slices Mr. E had placed in a crockery bowl.

A cool pitcher of sassafras root beer straight from the icebox was the ideal thirst quencher for the waiting lunch. Everyone stuffed a pocket bread until not one more veggies or slivers of cheese would fit. They each selected a chair around the oak table that graced the center of Mr. E's kitchen and sat down. Silence was evident for some minutes as everyone partook of the delicious food.

"Finally a worthy meal," said Velveteen. "We thank you so much. You have been a most gracious host. It is so very rude of us to eat and run, but you...."

"Say no more," interrupted Mr. E. "I very well understand. I'll get the buggy." Velveteen went with him to help.

Golden did some preliminary tidying of the kitchen. "That ought to do for now," she said, wiping a clean towel over the table. She had placed all of the perishables in the icebox. "Such a pleasant house," she mused, shutting the front door. "Do I really hear a train whistle?" she asked as she boarded the buggy with Velveteen's help.

"Yes," answered Mr. E. "Maybe the afternoon train is early." The pony took off at a clip. As they approached the station they could see a small blue train puffing a lot of steam. Attached behind its tender car were several cars loaded with dolls and toys. It almost looked like a circus train. The blue train blew its whistle. It was about to depart. Velveteen leapt from the buggy even before it stopped and ran to the platform.

"Is this the afternoon train?" he asked breathlessly.

"Afternoon train couldn't make it," replied the clown conductor. "But this is the little engine that could. Hop aboard!"



Chapter 9

Georg to the Rescue

Bethleann gasped as the little boat slid away from the table. “Oh, dear,” she cried. She snuggled down in the boat as it jiggled along. The tip of the umbrella-mast lit the path the boat was taking and Bethleann could see that she was entering a long corridor at the end of the room. She had not noticed this before and naturally wondered where it would lead. As the little boat floated along it bumped the sides of the corridor that was not that wide. The ceiling was probably low but to tiny Bethleann it looked far away. She tried not to cry more.

“I hope this takes me to that cat,” she said. “I have a few things to settle with him.”

Kerplash! Bethleann sat up taller in the boat. There was a huge splash sound from the room she had just left. Bethleann could hear a voice grumbling and growling. “There’s something about that voice.” Bethleann strained to make out any words but every syllable was muffled. Still she listened. She could hear the creature talking to itself. Yes, the voice really did sound familiar.

“Georg, is that you?” squeaked a tiny Bethleann. “Oh, no,” she cried as she realized her little voice would not carry far at all. “My voice is so small Georg will not hear me.” She began to tear up again. “Stop that,” she told herself. She tried to paddle the boat toward the room with her hands, but they were too small to do anything at all but get even colder than they already were. Bethleann sat back in the boat, defeated, and pulled a section of the lap robe over her shoulders for warmth. She would think of a better plan. One that did not involve crying, that was for sure.

Moments earlier, back at the Doggone, Georg had entered the pantry of Mr Culper’s kitchen. He noticed a shimmering spot on the floor near the doorsill. “It looks like some magic happened here,” he thought to himself. He bent down to inspect the spot. The instant he touched the mysterious place he began to feel himself pulled forward. He called to Wellington. He tried to resist the magnetic-like pull, but it was much stronger than even he, with all his bear force, was. He covered his face with his free arm, ready for the impact, but there was none. Instead, he tumbled forward into a dark tunnel.

“Bethleann must have come this way,” reasoned Georg as he tumbled over and over. “This has to be the work of that wretched cat.”

On and on Georg tumbled. Being somewhat bigger than Bethleann, his arms and legs could reach the sides of the tunnel and he used them to check his speed. At first, it was hard on his paws, but as he slowed down, he found he could stay upright without tumbling and even began to bounce along at a reasonable pace. He was rather enjoying himself when, splash, he landed smack in the puddle of tears.

“What the dickens?” exclaimed Georg, jumping to his feet. “There is water everywhere. I am soaked to the bone,” he grumbled angrily. “That cat is becoming a real nuisance.” He felt in his pocket for his handy torch he always carried with him and turned it on. It was actually a headlamp. Georg slipped the elastic band over his forehead and adjusted the beam. “There,” he

said, “two paws to explore with.” He immediately spied the table with the leftover food and pot of chocolate.

“Famished.” Georg stuffed two sandwiches into his mouth at once and poured some chocolate into a mug. “Humph, lukewarm,” he grouched as he took a sip. “This is a clue, though. I must not be too far behind Bethleann.” He looked around for any other clues but saw nothing.

Then he noticed the alcove with the long corridor. “Bethleann must have gone that way,” he clapped his paws, running forward through the water as fast as he could.

He thought he could hear a faint cry. “Bethleann, is that you?”

“Georg!” the tiny girl screamed as loud as she could. “Over here.”

“Bethleann, I am coming,” Georg splashed on. It seemed like he would never reach the alcove. Funny, the water was getting deeper. Soon Georg found that he had to swim. He swam and swam.

“Keep coming this way, Georg,” urged Bethleann. “I see your beam. I am in a boat not too far past the entrance to the alcove.” Georg finally reached the alcove and swam into the corridor. He spotted the light from Bethleann’s boat.

“Stay calm,” he panted. Georg was a very good swimmer. But today he seemed to be getting nowhere. He wondered why his progress was so slow. He just could not make any headway. Finally, the prow of the boat came into sight. It was a good thing. He was getting so tired, a few more arms pulls ought to do it. Georg surged ahead.

“Oh, Georg,” Bethleann leaned out to grasp his paw as he swam within reach of the boat. “You are here. But oh dear...” she stopped.

Georg could barely breathe. He slung one leg up over the side of the boat. “Mighty big boat you’ve got here, Bethleann.” He rolled his bear body into the boat and lay panting on the bottom, completely out of breath.

“Not really, Georg,” came the worried reply. Bethleann could see that Georg was beginning to shiver. She put the lap robe over him.

“What do you mean?” asked Georg, pushing himself up on one arm.

Bethleann looked hard at the bear, “You don’t know?” she asked.

“Know what?” he said.

“Umm, Georg. You seem to have shrunk a bit.”

“What!” Georg exploded into a sitting position.

“Well, um, you see, I shrank after dining with that cat. And it appears you have suffered the same fate. I guess it was not apparent to you since we look alright to each other.”

Georg was speechless, “Not again!” He was remembering another time he had shrunk. And it was a most unpleasant experience. Fortunately, it was temporary and did not even require magic to undo. But here he was, in the same boat again.

“That cat has got to be stopped,” he declared.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Bethleann chimed in, “but for now we had best concentrate on finding out where we are and where we are going.” She peered ahead but it was too dark everywhere except right around their boat.

“I cannot concentrate,” begged Georg, yawning. “I was tired before I started this adventure, and now I am totally exhausted.” He eased onto his side so as not to rock the boat

too much, even if he was again a very small bear, and shut his eyes. “Just gonna sleep for a minute.”

Bethleann looked at him in frustration. “Georg, this is not a good time to sleep.” But she too had been through a long morning and could barely hold her eyes open. They fluttered once, twice and then the pretty girl joined her bear friend in slumber land.

On and on the boat drifted, past rocky formations and caverns and wondrous sights, if only the two had been awake to appreciate them. And then, after a length journey the boat popped out of a small opening in the rocky corridor right into a lovely day-lighted lazily gliding along stream. There were birds chirping and graceful willows embracing the banks of the sweet waters as the boat wandered along.

The bright daylight dug into Bethleann’s consciousness. She squirmed. “It certainly has gotten crowded in this boat all of a sudden,” she fussed sleepily, trying to get comfortable. Georg was taking up entirely too much room. Suddenly she was wide-awake. “Georg,” she burst out, “Georg, wake up,” she shook the bear.

“Huh, what’s up, Bethleann?” asked a groggy Georg.

“Look, Georg,” grinned Bethleann, “we are out of the magic tunnel and...” here she grinned even more, “...we are back to our normal size.” They hugged each other with delight. In the distance they could hear a train whistle blowing.



Chapter 10 Caught!

Wellington raced toward the pantry, trying his best to get there first. It would not do for Miss Hilarey to stumble onto a magic scene, and somehow he just knew that is what he was going to find. Wellington scooted into the pantry with Miss Hilarey hot on his heels. Just then Mr Culper called her. “Whew,” breathed Wellington, “that was close.” He looked around expecting to see a disaster, or worse, but actually everything looked normal. Almost everything. “That floor looks a little too shiny, just there,” pondered Wellington, looking at the place where Georg had sunk through only moments before.

“Surely that spot has something to do with Georg, and Bethleann,” said Wellington to himself. It was then that he noticed what looked like a sheaf of train timetables lying on the floor nearby, curiously out of place in a tidy room loaded with food fixings. “Ah ha,” said Wellington, pouncing on the schedules. He shuffled through the folded papers and found some revealing notations in several of the margins as well as very telling information underlined. “That’s it,” Wellington shouted. He stuffed the schedules in his pocket, quickly put a counter spell on the floor magic, and bounded from the room.

“Thank you kindly for your hospitality, Mr Culper,” he called over his shoulder as he raced out of the inn. “We’ll be back soon.”

Wellington raced down the lane, his ears and cape flying in the breeze he was stirring up. He was running so fast that he plowed right into Mr. E who was walking along deep in thought. “Whoops,” yelped Mr. E, crashing to the ground. “My beautiful wings, I do believe you have bruised them, you dolt.” He looked up. “Oh, it’s you, Wellington. Where are you off to in such haste that you are a death threat to folks on the road?”

“Mr. E,” cried Wellington, “I am so sorry. Please, let me help you up.” Wellington helped the gent up and briskly began brushing the dirt and leaves from his wings.

“Stop, please. You will damage my wings further. I am fine. I am truly fine,” Mr. E huffed as he fluffed his wings, trying his best to get them to flutter in synch as they should.

Wellington, looking chagrined, stopped his busy-ness and stood humbly by, impatiently shuffling from one leg to the other. “Mr. E, I am so sorry,” he repeated, “but I am in somewhat of a hurry. I have a train to catch.”

“A train? Where are you going?”

“To find that Cheshire Cat and hopefully Bethleann and Georg,” Wellington explained, trying to move off in the direction of the train station.

“Well, I do believe I shall come with you. I am looking for Georg myself,” stated Mr. E.

“For Georg?” queried Wellington.

“Yes, Sir Boris has need of his expertise.”

“Well, do come along then,” suggested Wellington, tugging at Mr. E’s arm to urge him along. In short order they were at the train station. Wellington removed one particular timetable from his pocket and consulted it. “Due in right about now,” he proclaimed. A loud whistle

verified his announcement and a few minutes later a long and sleek train pulled into the station. Wellington and Mr. E hopped aboard, barely getting settled before the train pulled out and cruised on down the track towards the next stop.

The ride very quickly lulled both the cricket and the rabbit to sleep. At the sixth stop, a familiar couple got on and approached the seats across the aisle from the sleeping gents. "Look, Golden, it's Wellington with a friend," said Velveten as he sat down.

"I see they have been put under by the hypnotic effects of the rails, just as we were earlier," said Golden.

Just then, Wellington stirred. He felt like someone was talking about him. His eyes blinked open. "Why, hello," he said to Velveten and Golden. "What a surprise to find you here. When did you get on board?"

"Just now," said Velveten. "We got a lift over the mountain by a little blue engine that could. We thought he was the train we were looking for, but he does not handle passengers normally and so he suggested that we try this line. We are both quite certain that the Cheshire Cat secretly sequesters himself on board his favorite train as it pleases him. We just need to find the right one."

Wellington showed them the train schedules he found and explained that he too believed the cat to be riding the rails when he was not otherwise occupied.

The train was slowing down. Another station was up ahead. It pulled in and two more familiar figures got on. They entered the car where Wellington and his friends sat.

"Georg! Bethleann!" Wellington sprang to his feet. "I was hoping that you would turn up soon. I countered the sinking spell I suppose that mischievous cat put in the pantry. I guess he thought we were on his trail. And now we are!"

Georg and Bethleann looked green at the mention of the sinking spell. "It was the cat. He definitely has Georg's e," said Bethleann, happy to see Wellington on the train. Georg reached out to shake a paw with Mr. E, "Does Sir Boris have need of me?" he asked.

Mr. E winked, "Yes, much too sensitive material to trust to a telebee, so here I am."

Then Bethleann spotted Velveten and Golden, "Vel, you're here too? We are all here. How delightful!"

"Well, almost all," said Velveten. "We are missing the key element that has brought us all to this point."

"The Cheshire Cat!" they all exclaimed.

"Exactly," said Velveten. "Now we just need to figure out how to get him to expose himself and then we will be set."

As he was talking, Golden had silently, oh so silently, inched her way toward the back of the car. "There, I've got you!" she shouted. "Help, everyone, help me hold him down." They all rushed to where she struggled with what appeared to be plain air.

"Hold who down?" asked Georg.

"That cat, of course. Can't you see him?" struggled Golden as she fell to the ground, her hat flying from her head.

"No. Wait, Yes, there is a shimmer. I see him now. Hurry, everyone, grab a part." Georg lunged for the appearing ears and got a handful of fur for his effort, but managed to hang on.

Wellington got a paw, Mr. E another. Bethleann put her arms around the large cat's girth from behind and Velvetreen grabbed and hung onto the scruff of the neck.

But it was Golden who had the prize. She had the tail. "All right now, cat, you owe me one service, no strings attached." The cat looked woeful. "Oh, don't be so down," said Golden. "We will keep your hideaway secret safe. We only want one thing."

"Very well," whined the cat, rather deflated. "Here is your worthless e. I never liked the way it looked anyway." He tossed the e high in the air with his nose. Georg released his hold on the cat's ears and caught his long lost e.

"Excellent," he shouted. "My e is home again. Thank you, Golden. And everyone else." He tucked the e safely in his vest pocket. He would reattach it later. "Say, is anyone else hungry? Let's take the next train back to the inn and have more tea and tarts." They all laughed but agreed that the plan was sound. They released the Cheshire Cat. He slinked off into the corner to lick his wounds, grumbling that he was going to find his new friends, Sansa and Arya, for a good relaxing game of hide and seek. They were almost as clever at it as he was. At the next stop, the party got off and caught the Chattanooga Choo Choo back to the inn.

Mr Culper was so glad to see everyone back sooner than he ever expected that he brought out several complimentary trays full of the new tarts and pots of tea all around.

"Wellington," asked Velvetreen, after he had eaten his fill, "how did you figure out which train the cat would be on?"

"Easy," said Wellington, "when you have the clues. The timetables the cat dropped in the pantry showed me everything."

"I'll bet there was one promoting the Chesapeake and Ohio line," said Golden.

"There was, and the picture of Chessie was circled and a notation that said, 'My new nickname,'" returned Wellington.

"But how did you figure out to get on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe?" asked Bethleann.

"It's in the song," said Wellington, and he began to sing, just a bit off key:

What a lovely trip, I'm feeling so fresh and alive
And I'm so glad to arrive, it's all so grand
It's easy to see you don't need a palace
To feel like Alice in Wonderland.

"On the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe!" everyone chimed in, including Mr Culper and Miss Hilarey.

Mr Culper stepped forward. "In honor of this occasion, I am naming these tarts the Beary Best. Now eat up! More are ready to come out of the oven."

Georg grinned, needing no more encouragement.. Poet Laureate and his e retrieved. Life was good!

Epiloguz

"Georg," said Bethleann, leaning back in her chair, "could you recite a poem for me? I missed everything."

"We did too," said Velveteen. "I would love to hear some of your work, Georg with an e. Say, when are you going to reattach it anyway?"

"Soon," said Georg. "First I want to be sure it is working right."

Golden laughed, "Put it into the equalizer for a quick run through. That will solve any problem it might have."

"I'll do that," said Georg, "but right now I am going to recite a poem I wrote for fun. It's called *Deep Sleep*."

Ten friendly denizens of the dank and the deep
Desired one night to go to sleep.
But they couldn't decide which side of the bed
Would do for each, so they fought instead.

The octopus tossed left, the squid turned right,
The eel wanted power to turn on his light,
The skate pushed the mackerels away with a nudge,
The shellfish were left with no room to budge

It was a mayhem indeed, quite ghastly to see,
Those dear friendly denizens in such a melee.
Finally the tiniest one said, kind of low,
"Do you think we could sleep now? I'm tired you know."

So they all stopped their grumbling and wiggling about,
Each yawned and lay down with hardly a pout.
Thus ends our tale of slumber and sleep,
And how it can happen way down in the deep.

"Wow, Georg, that was awesome," said Bethleann. "You are one creative bear."

"Do you have any more?" asked Golden.

Georg laughed heartily, "Oh I do, I do. Plenty. But let me recite a favorite of mine, written by a dear friend. I think you will like it a lot."

Everyone settled comfortably in their chairs. They could listen to Georg recite all day long. His voice was so smooth and melodic.

"To *Emily*, by Sandra Leigh Jett Ball," Georg began:

"I'm launched," she said
`Neath ribbons of blue,
And she swooped
And she soared
In that glorious hue.

While silently, so silently
I shed a quivering tear.

"Bye now," she cried
As she fluttered away
With a kiss and a hug
She left us that day.

While silently, so silently
I shed a quivering tear.

"You're the best," I called
As she rose out of sight.

"I love you."

"Godspeed."

"You've turned out just right."

And silently, so silently
I shed a glimmering tear.

"Oh," said Golden, sniffing into her hankiechief, "that pretty poem makes me cry. I felt the same way when my babies left home. All of mine turned out just right too, they absolutely did," she smiled.

