

WELLINGTON RABBIT

MAY-DAY



Written and Illustrated by

Sandra Leigh Jett Ball

For grandson Sebastian Alton Ball
Who is a very merry soul

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

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Preface

It's hard to believe this is book IX in the series. It's been a wobbly but faithful writing adventure so far. The story starts in 1991 when having little money for gifts I made each of our five children a rabbit for Easter and decided that he needed an introductory sentence or perhaps paragraph. That Easter, the following and a third occurred before the sentence or two was a completed book and the sewing and stitching of the three main characters done. That first book privately published in 1993 complete with photographs of Wellington, Uncle Wells and Georg, was printed on standard paper, folded and sewn together with a heavier paper cover. The familiar Wellington cover illustrations were all individually hand painted and pasted onto the colored paper cover.

There were no interior illustrations and no chapters. Everyone loved the story but all wanted illustrations to go with the words. And Donny correctly and cleverly suggested that chapters were needed. And so I dove into the illustration side of the story, broke the thread into chapters and over the next three years we polished what became the 1996 edition.

The plan was always to have the story be a series, but things got in the way and book II was not written until 2001. By this time Donny had devised what would become the format for all the future books. It would be a simple ten chapter book, each chapter being three pages long with one full-page illustration per chapter. This was perfect. I wanted a book adults could enjoy for a simple read but also read to their children and grandchildren for a short night time story. And I wanted it to be a good read aloud book for beginner readers. Our format fit all those needs.

Books III, IV, V and VI rolled along year after year. And no matter when I started the ending was always a rush to get finished on time for Easter but never once late. Then came book VII in 2006, or half of it. Finally time caught up with me and instead of having no book, I opted to have a to be continued book, with five chapters one year and the conclusion the next. Book VIII followed that theme and perhaps new books would have too but for the birth of more grandchildren than books for dedications.

And so I am back to a book a year. If our progeny should grant us several grandchildren in the same year, no worries; there are a few earlier books that can use a dedication update which will absolutely happen when Wellington and the right publishing house bond.

A few comments on this book before I close. Hop and Topsy are real bunnies. Hop was a wild baby bunny nurtured lovingly by Debbie Dowty, our wonderful vet's wife, until Hop's short but happy life ended. I had a picture of him but a hard drive crash and no backup took it away. Topsy came into our lives via her 'mom' Kateland, a lovely OBX teen, who restrung my 40th anniversary rubies after the strand broke. Not only did she restring them, she graduated each one. One hundred and seventy-five tiny rubies individually measured for size from large to small and strung in shining splendor on a sturdy thread. We met Topsy, who was a tiny brand new baby bunny, when we went to pick up the finished rubies from our good friend Ginny Flowers,

who owns and is Cloud Nine where Kateland works. Then Topsy was tiny and new. Now she is grown and has her own home in Kateland's backyard where, we hear, she is happy and well-fed.

The wedding illustration for chapter 10 was patterned after our wedding. Bethleann wears my dress and Georg, Donny's cutaway tails. Everyone loves my dress story and so do I. When my good friend, Sherrie (Edwards) Oliva, was getting married in the fall of 1968, we went shopping together for her dress. I had never cared for wedding dresses at all, but then I saw one that I fell in love with. It was in one of the wedding themed display windows of Miller & Rhoads in Richmond Virginia where I worked as an advertising artist. That was the spring of 1968 and I was dating several nice guys but no one exclusively and really had no plans for marriage. But I loved that dress. I gazed fondly at it every day on my way into work, even when I was late, which was most of the time. And so it would be a quick glance at my dress, a dash up the handy stairs that led to Cook's travel agency located in an open mahogany balcony overlooking the Men's Department just inside the Grace Street door. Two more dashes up emergency stairs, hidden to the general public, a quick slip between bolts of cloth in the fabric department on the 3rd floor, into the advertising offices via the back way, and finally my conveniently located cubicle just in time for morning coffee break. Don't get me wrong, I never shirked my assignments; my ads were always done well and on time, but regular work-hour mornings were not for me.

And so when Sherrie and I went shopping in the bridal department of Miller & Rhoads, since she also worked in advertising and could put her employee discount to good use, the sales lady said she had a sample dress that was perfect for Sherrie and went to get it. She returned with my dress over her arm. Sherrie and I were the same size and had the same taste. I knew she would love it and that it would fit her perfectly. "My dress," I cried and told her that she could buy it if I could borrow it. I still had not met Donny even though we would meet, date, become engaged and be married by that next June. And so it was and so we did share the dress which now is with neither of us but resides in the costume department of Christ Church Episcopal School in rural Virginia. I'd love to see it again.

The stairs in the picture were in my grandmother's home on Three Chopt Road in the University of Richmond area of the west end of Richmond. We had our wedding reception there. It was a hot June day with no air conditioning. But the high ceilings in the turn of the century house helped as much as they could. The house was where my cousins and I spent all of our holidays and where I lived some of the time when I was going to Richmond Professional Institute and working summers in Richmond.

Wellington, Donny & I hope you enjoy this new adventure. You will most likely find a typo or more, making your copy a true collector's edition. Please excuse the distraction. We proof diligently, but when working at the eleventh hour, bleary eyes begin to blur even the obvious oversights and good intentions get easily tripped.

Sandra Leigh Jett Ball

Bayside, Colington Island, North Carolina



Chapter 1

Exciting News

Wellington was so excited. He was so excited that he could hardly keep his attention on his job. “Only a few more deliveries and I’ll be finished,” he checked his list to be sure. “Yup, just a few more,” he tucked the paper into his pocket. Wellington loved delivering Easter eggs and treats to the children and looked forward to it every year. Ever since his Uncle Wells had bestowed the title of Easter Bunny on him and then faded to the WEB, Wellington had taken his responsibility seriously and did his best to be sure that every child’s Easter basket was a treasure of treats. With Georg sowing wishflower seeds for all the children who could not or did not have an Easter basket and Bethleann and Benji assisting Wellington with deliveries, it was a merry Easter crew indeed.

But this year Wellington was distracted. He could not contain himself. Bethelann and Georg were getting married just as soon as the deliveries were over. “I am so excited!” yipped Wellington out loud. He hopped around on one foot. “Married! I just knew those two were meant for each other.”

Wellington loved Georg, the big black bear from the taiga who had become his instant friend when Wellington rescued him from a thorn patch after a muffed magic spell landed him in Willis Warren. And when Bethleann came along the following year, she fit the team like a glove. She was a long time friend of Uncle Wells.

“So much to do,” mused Wellington. Bethleann and Georg wanted a quiet simple wedding in the garden with all the spring flowers in bloom. It would be so beautiful. Wellington really liked their plan. “But simple or not, there is much to be done!” declared the rabbit. “Guests to invite. A menu to plan. Bethleann needs a special dress....” He needed to make a list of all the things that popped into his head but he did not want to take the time to write things right now. Soon enough he would be home and could jot down thoughts easily. Wellington hurried through the remainder of his deliveries but did not skimp on any treats. Soon enough he found himself rounding the bend in the road to the last home. The sun was just beginning to peek above the horizon. It was going to be a stunning day. “And shortly I’ll be home and sorting out wedding details.”

“Pay attention to you job,” he admonished himself. He slipped into the small stone cottage and tiptoed over to the Easter basket awaiting his delivery. He reached into his specially lined haversack, so lined to produce an endless supply of Easter eggs upon demand, and one by one loaded up the dainty basket with colored eggs. “Mostly pastel is what I need here,” he declared, discerning that the daintiness of the basket told him that it belonged to a little girl. “A bit of pink, purple, pale yellow and mint green. And a turquoise with fushia splashes.” He finished and admired his work. All of the eggs looked perfect in their cozy nest. “One of my better ones, if I do say so myself,” Wellington patted himself on the back ever so slightly. He was, after all, a humble rabbit but still recognizing that work well done, even one’s own, was a good

quality. Especially one's own, he thought with a smile. "If I don't like it then I should not expect anyone else to," he laughed as he resituated his haversack for the return trip home.

He took one last look at the prettily filled basket and stepped outside the cottage carefully closing the door behind him. He grinned remembering how it had taken him longer than it should have to perfect the unlock door charm. It was not a particularly difficult sequence, but Wellington had trouble with it and with a lot of hurrying just did get his deliveries finished before sunrise that first year. He started off down the lane. He must be sure he was out of sight before he invoked his cape's flying sequence. He only used the cape to relocate between villages. And not even that if the villages were close. Even in the night it was far too easy to be spotted at just the wrong time. And once the flying sequence was begun there was no turning back. At least that is what Uncle Wells had informed him. It was almost an after thought from Uncle Wells as he was fading to the land of the WEB. Wellington had no chance to find out more about why, or what would happen if he did have to or even felt like he had to pull back.

And so Wellington always made very sure he was far off the path before he put the cape into action. This morning he had tarried just a bit too long admiring his handiwork and now the sun really was breaching the horizon. It would not do for Wellington to be seen either. After all he was the Easter Bunny, to be talked about but never seen.

Ducking into a nearby clump of bushes, Wellington pushed through the initial bracken onto a pleasant looking meadow. He glanced around and saw no one, not even any grazing cattle. "Good," he stepped a bit farther into the clearing and gathered his cape about him. "Cape of love, cape of light, cape take Wellington into flight." He closed his eyes ready for ascent.

"What do ye think yer're doing in me field, laddie?" Wellington eyes flew open.

"This cannot be happening!" Wellington's mind was aghast as he gasped the words underneath his breath. Had he not been careful? Had he not always dreaded what this exact thing might do to the flight spell and done everything to assure he was completely alone? How now, of all times, had he slipped up? Maybe the cape would take him aloft anyway. He waited, his cape held tight against his chest by both arms.

"I askeder ye. What do yer think ye be doing in my field!" the farmer was stomping closer and closer to Wellington. Wellington stood frozen, unable to speak.

"Go Cape, go," he commanded. Nothing happened. The farmer was almost upon him.

"Please Cape. He'll just think he drank too much brew last night when he sees me disappear," Wellington begged the cape to do its work. Nothing happened.

Wellington could see that the farmer held a study walking stick aloft and was preparing to thrash him with it.

Moo, moo...out of the corner of his eye Wellington spotted a herd of Angus cattle moving into the scene. It looked as though they would intersect the farmer before he could reach Wellington.

"Where did they come from?" wondered Wellington. And on the heels of that thought, "My salvation! Come on cows. Move faster." But it was going to be nip and tuck and at that the cape was still not even slightly lifting Wellington. It was a limp as a wet dish cloth.

“Please, Cape, please. I’ll do anything. I’ll not make you take me sky diving ever again. I’ll keep you cleaner than clean. I won’t use you for a pillow when we’re on a bound-about. Please do something!” Nothing happened.

The cows were slowing down. They would not intersect the farmer after all. Wellington watched all of this as though it was a slow motion moving picture. He considered turning and running back into the bracken. But he quickly dismissed this idea. The farmer would have him before he could get far at all. He considered plunging into the middle of the herd, but the herd was not all that big. Enough cows to come between him and the farmer but not nearly enough to hide among.

“I am in such trouble,” he grumbled. “And it’s all my own doing. Why did I let myself get so caught up in Bethelann and Georg’s wedding now?” The farmer was almost upon him. “Hul..’ the words were tumbling out of Wellington’s mouth when strangely he felt himself lifting. The last thing Wellington remembered before being enveloped in a cloud of whiteness was a look of rage on the farmer’s face as he shook his stick at the ascending rabbit while mouthing words Wellington could not make out.



Chapter 2

A Big Date

“Georg!” beamed Bethleann. “We finished our deliveries so quickly this year. We’ll have even more time to plan our wedding.” She took the paw of her fiancé turning to face him as they crossed the meadow to Uncle Wells’ cottage which they called home since they spent far more time there than anywhere else. Fortunately it was a big enough cottage to house a bear, a girl and two rabbits with rooms left over for occasional guests.

Georg looked at the beautiful girl that had agreed to be his wife. He could not believe his luck. Bethleann could turn the head of any guy. She was smart and pretty and kind and thoughtful and clever. Georg could go on and on. He was simply head over paws in love.

It all happened last spring when Georg finally got up the nerve to ask Bethleann out on a real date and she accepted. He was so worried that she would laugh at him but she quickly put those fears to rest. They were already good friends. They spent a lot of time together with Wellington getting their Easter plans straight and they regularly went to the movies but this usually involved a group of whoever happened to be around. A real date was another thing altogether.

After Georg made his move, he fretted and fretted about where to take Bethleann. “It has to be really special,” he had muttered more than once as he went about getting all of his wishflower seeds packed away for later Easter scatterings. “Maybe a play...no, that would not give us much opportunity to talk.” He had to laugh at that observation, because of course, as friends, they talked all the time. But he knew that he meant private talk like sharing dreams and goals. And even talking about family and growing up and all that had transpired before they met each other.

Georg finally settled on inviting Bethleann out to dinner. He suggested a restaurant that she had talked about always wanting to eat at because it seemed so elegant. It was in a beautiful grand hotel in Watership Warren which would mean driving a car, something Georg was not too fond of doing and not too good at, but it was too far to walk and magic was not to be used for frivolous things like dates. Maybe he could practice driving in Uncle Wells’ roadster since that is the car he would be driving. No one used it much but it was handy to have available for occasions such as this.

Bethleann loved the idea of dinner at the Jefferson Hotel and they set the date for the next Saturday evening. Georg made reservations and then began to worry about what he should wear as well as his driving skills. He approached Wellington about both. Wellington tried to contain his glee that Georg and Bethleann were going out on a date. But his heart jumped for joy. He knew it, he just knew they were meant for each other. He had never pushed the point though. He did not want to be a match maker although he surely would have if they had not got it right. He wanted them to find their way themselves. And although it was but their first date he was still excited. “A start,” he whispered to himself, “a good start!”

Wellington was very adept at driving the car. Uncle Wells had made absolutely sure he could handle any emergency the car might offer. This was well before Georg had landed in Willis Warren and before Wellington had been titled Easter Bunny by Uncle Wells. Uncle Wells had simply wanted Wellington to be able to assist expectant mothers get to the hospital if a need arose and he himself be away on one of his many journeys. Expectant mothers or anyone else for that matter. Most rabbits were healthy as horses (Wellington never did understand why they could not be healthy as rabbits, but as no one he asked could tell him where the saying had come from) so he finally quit asking.

"You never know when this skill might be very important," Uncle Wells had said over and over as Wellington struggled with the mighty machine. Mastering the driving was not the end of it either. Uncle Wells made sure that Wellington could fix any part of the engine and transmission, restore the battery, replace all of the belts; and, something Wellington found himself doing quite a lot actually, changing and patching a tire. He even taught Wellington how to concoct a type of stop gap petrol if he could not get any from the few petrol stations located around the warren. Uncle Wells left no stone unturned when it came to mastering the mysteries of Stormy, as he so named his beloved roadster. "You never know, Wellington, you never know. Being prepared is your first line of defense."

At the time Wellington did not know what he was defending against but he respected his beloved Uncle too much to argue and so thoroughly learned the ins and outs of Stormy.

Wellington assured Georg that he would spend as much time with him as he needed to master the finicky Stormy and suggested a lesson right then and there. "Perfect!" agreed Georg. Bethleann was visiting Precisely and would not see him bungling along with his driving lessons. "But first I'm going to make a take-along cheese melt. Would you like one?" Wellington grinned and waved off the offer, saying he would meet the almost always hungry bear at the car.

Georg quickly put together a cheese melt with some already sliced bread and cheese he found in the icebox. "Can I come?" asked Benji, who was sitting at the kitchen table munching a brownie and pondering a crossword puzzle.

"Sure, Webby, oops, sorry, Benji." Georg had trouble remembering that Benji had sacrificed his name to break a powerful enchantment on the coats that made traveling through Wellington's wardrobe dicey. As much as he disliked the non-name little bunny, carried over from his bunnyhood when his mum had run out of names and simply called him little bunny, Webby gladly gave up his beloved name that had been given to him by his friends. After he rescued them all from the clutches of Black Veil they had wanted to give him something special and Wellington decided a name was it. So, in a grand naming ceremony, little bunny had become Webster.

After his sacrifice, there had been much discussion about another name, but nothing seemed to fit. He was destined to be little bunny forever, it seemed. Then he received a mystery pony post which contained a name for him from the famous writer and illustrator, Beatrix Potter. She gave him one of her favorite names, Benjamin Bunny. Everyone was delighted but no one more than newly named Benji.

"The ride might be kind of bumpy, though," suggested Georg. "I've only driven the car down the driveway once and it was a long time ago, right after Uncle Wells faded. Wellington

decided that I needed to learn to handle Stormy. It was pretty scary and Wellington changed his mind about my lessons.”

“Ummm, maybe I’ll finish my puzzle after all,” Benji settled back onto the stool.

Georg laughed. “Probably a good idea,” he added, taking a bite of the sandwich he had just removed from a pan on the stove top where he had plopped it to warm the bread and cheese together. “I’ll tell you all about it. But don’t say anything to Bethleann if you see her.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to surprise her with my driving when we go out to dinner next week.”

“You’ve going out to dinner with Bethleann?” Georg grinned. “Can I come?”

“No.” Benji looked dejected. “But after I learn how to drive really well, I’ll take you in the car to get some ice cream.”

“Cool! You’re the best, Georg. Bethleann is lucky you’re stuck on her.”

Georg started to protest but Benji was not even looking at him. Instead he was deep into the puzzle. And besides it was true. He was stuck on Bethleann. Georg stepped outside and hurried over to the car, polishing off his sandwich with two bites.

“Ready, Georg?” asked Wellington.

“Why have you got those goggle things, and that funny coat on?”

“Because sometimes the windshield falls out and it’s a bear, oops, it’s hard to put back in. When that happens I just toss it in the backseat until I get home. The goggles keep the bugs out of my eyes and the coat keeps my fur clean. Yours are on the car seat.”

“Bugs? Windshield falling out?” Georg was unhappy. “Maybe I don’t want to use the car after all.”

“Nonsense. We’ll fix it right before your big date. I just never took the time before now.”

Georg looked at the car. He looked at his paws. He looked at the ground. He really did want to use Stormy for his date with Bethleann, even if it was getting more complicated by the moment. Finally he looked at Wellington. “Okay. Let’s go. I can do this.”



Chapter 3

Hop Skip & A Jump

Benji was feeling good. He was feeling very good. His new name fit perfectly, exactly the right size. He was beginning to be pretty sure he really did like it maybe even more than the beautiful name Wellington had given him. Webby was a strong name and he had loved it, but Benji just felt, well, cozy and confident. “Thanks, Beatrix Potter,” he whispered, “wherever you are. You really do know a lot about rabbits.”

Benji fingered the fabric of the new jumpsuit Bethleann had made him with its big B on the front. It was his favorite color, Carolina blue. Yes, Benji was indeed feeling really good. He had just finished his first solo Easter deliveries and had not made one single mistake. He was thinking that it be just might be possible that he was the first one in the team back. The thought of besting Wellington on his first trip gave Benji a tiny smug feeling. “And I did not even have a magic cape or wand to use,” he sniffed a bit proudly. “Just my super bunny hopping power!” Benji was a hop scotch champ and knew all the clever bunny hop moves like the back of his paw. Last spring Wellington invited Benji to be an official part of the Easter delivery team. Prior to that Benji had always had to stay behind because they all thought him too young. Even though he had rescued them all from the clutches of Black Veil, too. But to be fair, he told himself, they had fallen into the clutches of Black Veil because of him, so maybe their caution about his lack of maturity was justified.

Then last spring Wellington had put him to a horrible test or so it seemed. Apparently Wellington had gotten tired of the wardrobe full of coats being such a hazard and sent Benji into the closet on a pretense. Benji tried invoking the a charm like he had done successfully when he had snuck up on Wellington. This time it failed completely and Benji had nothing else to try. The coats had attacked him viciously and he barely got out of the wardrobe with all of his fur. His fur actually did suffer quit a bit and he even got a bad case of coat poisoning. He was so mad at Wellington that he took off on a bound-about hoping to clear his brain. But his brain only stayed muddled because he had not prepared properly for his bound-about and so when he found himself whisked into the Salt Mines of Misery he did not even feel sorry for himself. And then he found his friends there in terrible trouble trying to break the horrible coat enchantment and get home. It took all of them to pull the parts together that finally broke the spell and in doing so also took them home. “I’d sacrifice my name again to help my always friends,” declared Benji, and he meant it.

“I guess Wellington could see that I had grown up enough to handle Easter deliveries,” he beamed because it was right after that when Wellington asked him to be a part of the delivery team.

Yep, he was feeling really, really good. He sauntered down the lane toward home, or more correctly Uncle Wells’ former home because they all lived there most of the time. Georg had his own little cottage near Wellington’s. Bethleann had a home in the land of humans but she

hardly ever went there. And soon she and Georg would have their own new home right here in Willis Warren since they were getting married.

"I guess I am the only one that doesn't have a home," said Benji to the air. "Sure I can live at Uncle Wells for as long as I like but it would be fun to have my own place," he continued his dialogue with himself.

He had only ever lived with his mum before he went to work for Black Veil. "Yup a home of my own is what I need. I am going to see what Wellington thinks about my plan. Zounds what was that?" He felt himself falling to the ground with some sort of fur thing in his face.

"Oh sorry," yipped a small bunny. "Didn't see you just there." He hopped off of Benji.

"Gotcha, Hop," another bunny voice and another tiny bunny body landed on top of the first one.

"No fair, Topsy," the first bunny said. "HE slowed me down." And he pointed to Benji who was sitting up and checking himself for injuries.

"Who are you?" asked Topsy to Benji, the game they were playing momentarily forgotten.

"Who are you?" returned Benji, looking from one bunny to the other. "A body isn't safe on a common lane it seems."

"We were playing Hop A-Long and didn't see you."

"You were playing Hop A-Long, near a public road? Are you daft? You could have been seriously hurt. We do have cars on these road you know, not many, it's true, but they are bigger and stronger than you. Where do you live? Who is responsible for you?" Benji was mad. He scooted the two bunnies off of the road and then glared at them. They were out of control. Hop A-Long was a silly bunny game they all played as youths. One bunny tried to jump on another bunny while the second bunny avoided this at all costs, to the point where it could get risky for anyone that might happen to be in the immediate area. It could be a hazard to the players too as they were so distracted by the game they rarely saw anything around them.

It was best played in a meadow with lots of unencumbered hopping room. Both bunnies, chaser and chased, could hop in any direction at any time and naturally did. Sometimes a chased bunny got caught on the first hop but sometimes a good round could go on and on as each rabbit outguessed the other. After a capture sides were switched and so on until one bunny had won three in a row. The first win was called a Hop, the second a Skip and the third a Jump. Benji had not played Hop A Long in ages.

"Well," he waited for an answer from either of them.

"Ummm...we, ummm," the first bunny, Hop, hopped from one paw to the other.

"We, ummm...well you see," the second bunny, Topsy, stammered and avoided Benji's eyes.

"Somebody tell me something right now or I'm taking you to the bunny ward." The bunny ward was a place where orphan bunnies lived. They were well taken care of in the ward but because funding was always low the bunnies had to work at assigned jobs to help pay for their keep. The ward was a sad necessity in the warren because so many families were broken up when humans ran their powerful machines in the fields, plowing or harvesting or even cutting. Not Willis Warren fields of course. It was in far away human fields where these bunny family tragedies occurred, but Willis Warren had one of the largest bunny wards in Rabbitdom and so

most young bunnies who found their families torn apart by big machinery were sent to the Willis Warren ward.

“You can’t do that,” declared Topsy.

“I most certainly can,” said Benji, “and I will. Just look at what you did to my haversack.” Benji held up his sack which was dripping a sticky goop.

“What happened, governor,” asked Hop.

Governor! Benji glowered, “You have smashed over a dozen eggs, that is what has happened.”

“Eggs?” asked Topsy. “Why are you toting eggs in your haversack? Don’t you have an egg basket?”

“Yeah,” said Hop “Everyone knows you put eggs in an egg basket and not a,” and here he reached for Benji’s sack to touch it, “cloth sack.”

Benji lifted the haversack out of the bunny’s reach. “I’ll have you know that I have a very good private reason for putting eggs in my sack. And it is none of your business, by the way.” The eggs were there because Benji only had a thin lining of magic dust from Wellington for his sack. It only allowed for him to demand eggs for Easter baskets a few times on an entire trip as it took a long time to recover the necessary magic to summon more eggs. And so Benji loaded his sack with eggs and distributed them and then reloaded. After his last delivery he had left over eggs, and rather than just dump them unceremoniously, he decided to bring them home with him and ask Wellington what to do with them.

Benji shifted his haversack to his shoulder. “Now since you cannot seem to tell me where you live or who your parents are, I think we shall just take a trip to the bunny ward.” He grabbed a bunny in each paw before they could so much as utter a protest.

“But you can’t sir,” cried Hop. “We’ll get in ever so much trouble.”

“And why would that be, pray tell?”

“Because, because,” sniffed Topsy, “we already live there and we’ve run away.”



Chapter 4

New Friends

"You ran away?" Benji looked from one to the other. "You ran away?"

Hop squirmed, "Let go of me." Benji held on tighter.

Tipsy wiggled, "You're hurting me."

"Not nearly as much as I am going to. Now," with this he relaxed his grip ever so slightly on the two, "what do you mean by running away from a perfectly good home."

"It's not perfectly good," pouted Tipsy. Benji glared at her. "Sir," Tipsy added.

"They make us work hard," whined Hop.

"There is nothing wrong with hard work," said Benji, astounded at the brashness of these youths.

"It's not that," said Tipsy. "They make us do the same thing over and over. Sir."

"Yeah," said Hop. "Like scrubbing the bathroom floor. We scrub it really good and then they make us do it again."

"Maybe you did not do such a good job."

"But we do. We really do. Every time, we have to do it over again. And sometimes again after that." Tipsy's lip quivered. "My mom taught me all about cleaning. I was the bunny that kept the den clean while she tended the babies. Sir."

"They just don't want us going outside to play." Hop tried to loosen Benji's grip on his arm.

"Do they treat all the bunnies like this?" asked Benji, beginning to believe that the bunnies might just be right.

"No," said Tipsy slowly. "They have favorites. Some bunnies never have to do extra work or repeats."

"Repeats?"

"Doing the same task over again when you just finished it. We call them repeats."

Benji pondered the situation. Running away was not good, under any circumstances. But it really sounded like the bunnies were getting harsh treatment. He reached a decision. "Let's go," he started walking, pulling both bunnies along.

"Where're we going, governor?" asked Hop.

"Stop calling me governor. My name is Benji."

"Sorry, governor, er, Benji. But begging your pardon, where're we going? Not back to the ward?"

"Not just yet. You most certainly will go back to the ward but first things first. You look half starved. Maybe the ward needs a new dietary program. Wellington will know what to do."

"Do you know Wellington?" asked Hop.

"How do you know Wellington?" Benji returned.

"Everyone knows Willis Warren's most famous Hop Scotch champion. His picture is all over the ward. Say, you look a lot like that Webby who played with Wellington and the Double U's for the last championship."

"I am Webby. My name is Benji now. Long story."

"You're," Hop's mouth flew open, "Webby, the hop scotch champ Webby?" Benji nodded. "Wow I've wanted to meet you ever since I saw you do those killer jumps at the championship," said Hop. "I went to that match with my dad. He had to trade a lot of his best fur to get really good seats. That was before, before the machines....well before," his voice trailed off.

"It's Benji, Hop, not Webby. Is that where we're going?" said Topsy, changing the subject. They were nearing Uncle Wells' cottage.

"Yes," said Benji, glad not to have to deal with the death of Hop's dad just then. They reached the front door. Benji released the bunnies and tried the latch. It was locked. That meant Wellington really wasn't back yet. Nor Georg nor Bethleann. He was first! And on his rookie year as part of the Easter Bunny team. He easily worked the unlock door charm and ushered the bunnies inside.

"Wow," said Topsy, looking around the small but well appointed entrance foyer. "I never saw such a nice room, but where's the bed?"

"Oh this is not a real room," said Benji. "It's called a foyer."

"Who's her?" asked Hop

"Not who's her, Hop," said Topsy. "For her, it's a for her. Right, Benji?" she looked to Benji for support in her pronunciation of the new word in her vocabulary.

"Not for her, who's her?" returned Hop pointing over Benji's shoulder.

Benji whirled around to look. "Bethleann! And Georg," he cried, forgetting the bunnies. "I finished without a hitch." He rushed from the foyer, through the walk-through pantry and into the kitchen beyond where his friends were coming in through the back door. Topsy and Hop looked at each other and then followed, stopping in the middle of the pantry.

"Benji that's great!" exclaimed Bethleann. "I remember my first year. I was a nervous wreck and mixed up so many baskets that I had to go back and redo. I was exhausted by the time I got everything straight. And the charms. I could not remember any of my charms, not even the easy ones. Did I ever have a case of the first time nerves," she finished. "Hullo, who are these adorable bunnies?" she spotted Topsy and Hop standing in the pantry.

Hop's mouth was hanging open. He was staring at the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. And she was walking toward him. He felt faint. "Hi, my name is Bethleann. And who might you be?" Hop could not speak.

"Hop. I'm Topsy and he's Hop."

"You're Topsy? Benji, have you been giving these bunnies Burrbear Beer?"

"Bethleann! Of course not. They're too young for Burrbear Beer. Her name is Topsy. We sort of ran into each other on Walkin Home Lane. I brought them home for a snack before we head to the ward, where they live." He and the bunnies exchanged glances but neither he nor they said anything.

“Well, let’s cook up a feast then,” said Georg. He was always ready for any good reason to cook and, of course, eat the results. He began rummaging in the ice box for ingredients to make omelets. “Milk, butter, cheese, broccoli, onion, green pepper, mushrooms...that’s a good start.”. He put everything on the counter and reached for a mixing bowl. “If you cook the omelets, Benji, I’ll put together some buttermilk biscuits.”

I can cook the biscuits,” offered Bethleann. Georg and Benji looked at each other. Bethleann could cook well enough but nothing topped Georg’s biscuits.

“Thanks, but I’ve got it, Bethleann.” Georg quickly began assembling the ingredients before she could say a thing.

“I can follow a recipe, guys. But,” grinned Bethleann, “I know better than to challenge Georg’s legendary biscuits.” She got down three more mugs for tea. She set some raspberry ming to steeping. She knew Uncle Wells and Wellington would agree that serving the ward bunnies their best tea was the thing to do.

“Here, Tippy,” said Benji. “You can start chopping the veggies. Hop, crack the eggs into this bowl while I grate the cheese.” The two bunnies took up their stations and set to work.

“Hop,” said Bethleann, looking over at the busy bunny. She could see that a lot of shell was landing in the egg bowl. “Have you ever cracked eggs before?”

“Not really,” he blushed.

“Let me help you,” she offered. She showed him how to scoop out the shell pieces from the bowl. And then how to tap an egg on the edge of the bowl and gently pull the cracked egg apart, holding onto the shell while letting the yolk and white drop into the bowl. With Bethleann teaching him, Hop was a quick study.

Before long five beautiful omelets sat on individual plates under separate warming bowls and the biscuits were just about finished browning. Bethleann placed pots of jam on the table and they all sat down to claim an omelet and make space on their plate for the biscuits that Georg was removing from the oven. It was going to be a fabulous feast.



Chapter 5

Afloat

Wellington floated up and up. He could hardly see the farmer or the cows anymore. "Maybe that farmer will think a wind gust lifted me up," mused Wellington. "Yes, that's it, a sudden wind gust. Excellent thought, my boy," he patted himself on the back and settled into his ascent.

Usually his cape swooshed him from one location to the next at lightning speed, but this time it floated him along at a very leisurely pace. Soon his legs began to tire and then his arms. He jiggled the cape thinking maybe it was stuck but nothing changed. He tried gathering his feet up into the folds of the cape but it was not long enough. He tried lying back but the cape kept pushing him back upright. "Alright, I've just about had enough of your shenanigans, Cape," fumed Wellington. "How long is this nonsense going to keep up?" Cape gave a little wiggle as though to acknowledge Wellington's question but that was it. They continued on the slow drifting pace.

"Rabbit whiskers," grumbled Wellington, "I'll never get home at this rate. And I have so many things to do to get ready for the wedding." Wellington scowled at his own grumbings that he had given into, but he was so tired and so thirsty and had so many lists to start.

Suddenly his cape began to jerk and twitch and yank Wellington up and down. Wellington grabbed his haversack even though it was looped across one shoulder and through the other arm. The jerking motion became more violent. Wellington forgot about being tired and thirsty. He felt sick to his stomach. He felt like he was going to throw up.

And then just when he was certain that he would do just that, the bottom fell out of everything and Wellington felt himself falling and falling and falling. The cape flew up straight above his head. It was a good thing that the runaway cape was secure around his neck with a sturdy cord, otherwise Wellington was sure it would have flown on up into the sky never to be seen again. "Stop, Cape, please stop!" But it seemed the cape was too stubborn to stop. Or maybe it was powerless. Wellington felt Cape was holding on for its own dear life. The cords around Wellington's neck were like frantically clinging arms.

Even in his own terror Wellington knew his cape needed his comfort. "It's alright Cape, we'll get through this together. We always have managed to come out of scraps smiling and none the worse for wear. Well, not too much the worse, anyway." Wellington remembered one bound-about they had been on when his cape took a shine to a girl cape that was performing with her owner at a medieval faire they happened upon. Cape started doing so many show off tricks dragging Wellington up and down and around and over that Wellington had to finally take him aside and firmly explain that the way to impress a girl was not with show-off tricks. Cape was crushed but saw that the pretty girl cape was flirting more with a long velvet cape that was also in the show, than him. She even flapped her fringes at Cape when he tried to engage her in a cape dance between her show sets. She flapped her fringes hard and they rather stung. So Cape reluctantly took Wellington's advice and sulked off, his pride very wounded. Wellington did the best

he could to cheer up Cape. He bought him a new tie cord with gold threads all through it and even had him groomed in a very expensive cape salon. Eventually Cape had come out of his funk, but he sure wasn't much fun for awhile.

Wellington was still falling. How far down was the ground? He was descending through bilious clouds. He saw only cloud vapor in every direction. He braced for an impact. It had to come soon. He closed his eyes, then changed his mind and opened his eyes. Better to see what had to happen soon.

But just as swiftly as the rapid fall had started, it stopped. The cape simply fluttered down, settled around Wellington's shoulders and then his feet touched a softness. His landing was so gentle that he did not even lose his balance. Wellington had absolutely no idea where he was, there was nothing to see. Nothing at all. In every direction it was pitch black. Wellington could faintly see the clouds he had just fallen through but they were drifting away as he stared. It was as though he was in some sort of black hole.

"Hullo," he called out as he shifted his haversack and smoothed his ears. "Is anyone around?"

"This way," came a voice in the dark.

"Which way? I cannot see you."

"I thought you had been here before. Lousy information apparently. Come closer and let me have a look at you."

Wellington hopped toward the voice. "Who are you?"

"Oh, good grief, this will never do!" the voice expressed extreme exasperation. "You are not even close to being dark. Sources really did foul this one up. Do not move."

Wellington wondered what was going to happen but he stood as directed. He felt a cold spray begin to cover his body from top to bottom. "What the daft are you doing?" he boomed.

"Relax, it's only a succedaneum for permanent dye. It will wash off."

"A succ...a what?"

"A succedaneum. Don't you read books? It's a substitute. Here, put these on," the voice handed Wellington what felt like a pair of glasses. He put them on and just like that he could see a small black dog and that they were in a place of rocks and dust and little else.

"Who are you and where am I?" asked Wellington.

"I am who I am, sir, and you are where you are. Follow me, please." Wellington fumed at the nonsense statement and started to demand a better answer but then decided to let it slide.

"Very well, lead on, Who-eye-am," The dog took off running, weaving in and out of the rocks on some kind of path that Wellington could not see. Everything looked the same. Rocks and dust in every direction. Wellington had to hurry to keep up. The strap that was supposed to hold the glasses in place was old and practically useless. The glasses continually slipped down Wellington's nose plunging him back into darkness. Wellington found himself constantly having to push them back in place so that he could see where he was going. "These glasses are annoying."

"Sorry sir, but dark is the way master likes his kingdom."

"Dark? Master?"

"Yes."

Dog of few words thought Wellington. Soon they came to a sagging post barely holding up several poorly tacked on signs. One read Yellow Brick Road with an arrow pointing the way they had just come and one that was so smudged as to be unreadable with an arrow pointing ahead. "Yellow Brick Road? Like in the land with that talking Scarecrow and heartless Tin Man?" wondered Wellington.

"Land with Dorothy, yes," said the dog.

"Are you Toto then?" The dog turned, trotted back to Wellington and bit him on the leg. "Ouch! Why did you do that?"

"Do not say my name here. Ever!"

"Why not?" asked Wellington.

"Because I am only working here temporarily. The monkeys hired me out. They have Dorothy, you know. They told me there would harm her if I did not do their bidding. Soon I will free Dorothy and we will leave this wicked land."

"But I thought Dorothy melted the witch and after that she got to go home."

"That's the book version. Everyone knows books tell stories the way a writer wants them to be, not how they really are."

"The book is wrong?"

"More things wrong than right. Crazy writer. Did get the tornado thing spot on though. Took us right out of Kansas just like that. And landed us here."

"Are we in Oz then?" asked Wellington.

"You do have to know everything. Sources got that right."

Wellington resented the implication but it was clear that the more questions he asked the fewer answers he got.



Chapter 6

A Plan

“Wonder what could be keeping Wellington?” Georg asked between bites of omelet.

“He is very late,” mused Benji as he spread cherry jam on a buttered biscuit.

“Not like him at all,” said Bethleann sipping her tea.

“Maybe he’s in trouble,” said Topsy and Hop together.

Georg and Benji and Bethleann looked at each other. “Not again,” Georg finally said.

“Happens almost every Easter season,” sighed Bethleann.

“It’s usually not his fault,” said Benji. Bethleann and Georg looked at him. “Well, some of the time it’s not,” he finished weakly.

“Wellington is a magnet for trouble, I’d say,” said Georg.

“You’re a fine one to talk,” laughed Bethleann. “Seeing as it was your own trouble that put you and Wellington together to begin with.”

“The spell book was old and hard to read,” Georg’s voice trailed off.

“Spell book?” Topsy’s ears perked up.

“Ummm...spell...ing book. My spelling book. I was studying for a spelling bee.”

“How could that get you in trouble?”

“Have you ever tried to spell ursprache, or succedaneum, or smaragdine?”

“S-M-A-R—T, s-m-a-r-t, smart. There does that count?” Topsy loved spelling. “Just kidding. I get it. Spelling can be tricky.”

“But can we help?” Hop tried to bring the conversation back to the lost Wellington.

“Clean up?” asked Georg as he began clearing the table. “Sure enough. Put those leftover biscuits in this tin.” He handed Topsy a container. “And the jams in the icebox.” He directed this to Hop.

“We meant find Wellington,” said Hop as he tucked the jam jars into the icebox and began drying the dishes Georg was now washing. Bethleann cleared away the tea fixings. Benji straightened the table setting. Topsy stacked the dried dishes on the clean table.

The three older friends looked at each other.

“Whatever do you mean?” asked Bethleann.

“We meant that we’re ready for adventure!” squeaked Topsy jumping up and down.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, not so fast,” Benji put his paws on the excited bunny. “You two are going back to the ward just as soon as you thank Bethleann and Georg for a wonderful meal.”

“No!” yelled Topsy. “Not that place.”

“Young lady,” fumed Benji, “that is no way to talk about folks that have given you a roof over your head and a warm meal in your stomach.”

“But they are mean to us,” pouted Hop. “We told you that.”

“Yes, you did and we shall have a chat with the headmaster about your stories, but you will return to the ward and apologize for running away.” He looked firmly at both the bunnies.

“You ran away?” asked Bethleann. “Why ever for?”

Georg finished cleaning out the sink and dried his paws on a towel. "Running away is not good."

The bunnies told Georg and Bethleann how they had been mistreated at the hands of the ward guardians.

"Be that as it may," said Benji when they had finished. "They need to return to the ward and make amends."

"Yes," agreed Bethleann and Georg. "Running away is no way to solve your problems."

Hop and Topsy looked at each other. They loved their new friends. They did not want to return to the ward. Benji could sense their disappointment. "There is no way around this. You cannot grow up into strong rabbits without acknowledging your mistakes."

"But we did not make a mistake," yelled Hop. "The ward supervisor did. She hates us."

"Hate is a strong word, Hop," said Georg.

"Well, she does."

"Nevertheless, we shall be off to the ward. Now mind your manners," Benji waited while the two thanked Georg and Bethleann.

"Good biscuits, Georg," said Hop. "The best I ever had, really."

"Thanks for the special tea," said Topsy to Bethleann. "I love raspberries. I know where some really nice bushes are. Maybe I can show you sometime."

"You're welcome," said Georg. "We can cook together again."

"I'd love to gather some leaves from those bushes with you sometime, Topsy," Bethleann hugged the bunny.

"Come now, kids. Let's get this over with." Benji guided the bunnies out of the kitchen and toward the front door. Georg and Bethleann walked with Benji and the bunnies to the door. "You know Benji," began Bethleann.

"Yes?" said Topsy hopefully.

"We really should start a search for Wellington."

"And we could help," yipped Hop. "We are ever so clever."

Georg appeared lost in thought. Benji scratched his chin. "They must let the ward know where they are."

"Yes they must," said Georg, "but maybe we can divert their punishment to our advantage."

"What have you got in mind, Georg?" asked Bethleann.

"What if we were to accompany Benji and the bunnies to the ward. And...let me think."

"And say they were wreaking havoc in our fields?" offered Bethleann.

"And they needed to repair the damage," continued Hop.

"And make them fix every single thing," Topsy gleamed.

"It could take a long time," added Hop.

"We shouldn't lie," said Georg.

"What if instead of us all going, I report how they ruined my haversack which is true enough," said Benji. "And they simply must do chores for us to help pay for a new one."

"That's better," said Georg.

"Then it's settled," Topsy hopped for joy.

“Not so fast, youngster,” laughed Benji. “There is still the matter of apologizing to the wardmaster, and getting him to agree to our plan.”

“It’ll work,” said Hop. “It just has to work. I hate those silly ward chores.”

“Keeping things clean is not silly,” returned Benji. “It may be silly to overdo it, but that is not for us to say. You should respect your teachers.”

“If we had good teachers it would be easier,” grumbled Topsy.

“You would be good teachers,” Hop looked hopefully at Bethleann, Georg and Benji.

“We’ll see,” was all Benji would offer. “Let’s be off now.” He opened the door and stepped outside. It was a glorious spring day. The two bunnies followed but not before they gave Bethleann and Georg another bunny hug.

“It’ll work. It’ll work. It’ll work,” Hop and Topsy sang over and over as they skipped down the lane. Benji followed at a more dignified pace, after all he was a grown-up rabbit now with two almost charges.



Chapter 7

Something Strange

Wellington trotted along behind the dog called Toto but not here and reviewed his situation. "Seems like I am in Oz. That is where the Yellow Brick Road is, at least in the book which I am now told is full of fiction. If we are in Oz maybe we're going to the Emerald City." He muttered all of this under his breath. It would only create trouble for the dog to hear his questions.

"Emerald City is only in the book," the dog spoke.

Wellington was quite often annoyed and occasionally relieved that many could read his thoughts or so it seemed. Maybe it was just lucky stance. Wellington wanted to ask again about the scarecrow and the tin man, and the lion, but he kept his silence.

"Don't you want to know about the others?" pressed the dog.

"The others?"

"Yes, Dorothy's others. Who did you think I meant?"

"No I'm fine." Wellington was not going to give the dog any satisfaction.

"Yes, you do want to know," the dog snickered. "You are as transparent as a veil."

"Veil? Why did you say veil?" Wellington felt anger rising in his throat.

"Did I? Just a word that came into my head."

"That I do not believe. You are doing Black Veil's bidding. I am certain of it. What is that nasty rabbit up to now?"

But the dog was silent. Wellington's fur began to itch. "Ugly spray," he scratched his arm.

"Don't do that," commanded the dog. "The coating will come off and I'll have to spray you again."

Wellington began to wonder how it was he constantly found himself in troubling situations. Was he a trouble magnet? Maybe it was Black Veil shaking things up. That was a more comforting thought, as uncomfortable as it was. He did not want to believe that he was a trouble magnet. He meant to always have good intentions. He liked to think the best of everyone, even Black Veil. That one was just terribly misguided.

"And mean. Black Veil is mean," the dog called Toto but not here tossed his thoughts into the air. "He and those monkeys are in cahoots. If only I could get my Dorothy safely back to Kansas."

"Maybe the WEB can help," suggested Wellington.

"The WEB?"

"Yes, it is a mystical organization where all the former Easter bunnies fade to after, after they are finished with the job. Black Veil thinks he will be able to join if he takes over Easter. But he is wrong. They would never have the likes of him. Controlling Easter is not the way for him to achieve a space in the WEB."

"How do you know all of this?"

Look who's asking a lot of questions now, Wellington thought, but said, "Anyone with any sense knows that love is the only way to the WEB. True, caring love. Not greed for self gain love."

"Black Veil is barking up the wrong tree?" asked the dog.

"Black Veil is wasting his time and ruining things for many."

"Why don't you tell him?"

"Now you are the delusional one. He can only hear himself and his plans." Wellington started scratching again.

"Interesting," said the dog. "Stop scratching. We turn here." He trotted left and stopped.

Wellington could see nothing. He wiped his glasses with the edge of his cape, "Sorry, Cape," he whispered and put the slightly cleaner glasses back on. A huge wall made of dark rocks appeared almost out of nowhere. It was dark and depressing looking. Wellington waited for something to happen. The dog was stone silent. He looked at the dog called Toto but not here. He did not move. He did not speak. He appeared to have turned to stone. Wellington felt a shiver go down his spine. He started to touch the dog but hesitated.

"What do you want?" a head appeared at a small door located part way up the castle front. Wellington waited for the dog to say something. "Well then, move on if you have no business."

"Umm..." started Wellington after realizing that the dog was not going to say a thing, "I've brought ummm...I've brought the master a, a statue. Yes, a fine statue," he pointed to the stiff dog. Wellington heard several locks and latches being undone. And then at ground level a huge door swung open and a dark rabbit dressed in a black tuxedo appeared.

"Well, be snappy about you. Bring the gift along." Wellington tried to pick up the dog but he was very heavy. He readjusted his hold and tried again.

"Lift with your legs not your back and it will be easier," a voice came from behind Wellington. Wellington was so startled that he did just as he was told and it definitely was easier to pick up the heavy stone dog. He started to step toward the door. "Stand still just a moment more while I slip into your haversack." Wellington was intrigued to know who was helping him but dared not sneak a glance or mouth even a word. He stood stone still.

"Come on, be snappy about you." Wellington felt a tap against his leg. His new friend was in place. He stepped through the portal and the huge door slammed shut behind him. The door keeper seemed to have disappeared. Wellington took in the scene before him. He was in some kind of town or village. There were lots of rabbits and others going about their business but but they all seemed downtrodden and dragged about, never looking up or exchanging greetings.

"Need a lift?" Wellington was startled out of his trance. He was looking at a very dark horse. "I might. Where is the master? I have a gift for him."

"In the palace near by but too far with that load. Put the pup in my cart and climb on up." Wellington set the dog carefully in the cart and did his best to clamor onto the horse. Finally, after many attempts, he was astride.

"Don't ride much, do you?"

"Not really," Wellington thought he saw a spot of color on the horse's withers where his foot must have brushed over and over as he made his many unsuccessful attempts to get on.

"Are you a horse of a different color?"

“Why?” asked the horse nervously.

“I see green coming through your gray.”

“Neigh! That cannot be. I’ll be lashed. Help me. Very bad things happen here to anyone or thing that is not dark.”

“I can fix that,” said Wellington. He reached into his haversack for the can of spray that he had picked up when the dog had turned to stone. “Steady now,” he sprayed the spot until it was completely covered.

“Gratitude.” The horse began to move and a few blocks away stopped. “We have arrived at the palace. It may be a long time before the master sees you. He is very busy.”

“I will wait,” said Wellington. He jumped off of the horse and removed the dog from the cart. He wondered if his new friend was still in his haversack. He had not felt anything when he reached for the spray can. Two large rabbits with a big spikes stood on either side of the palace door. They spoke not a word but opened the doors for Wellington. Wellington stepped into the huge entrance hall and looked around. There was nothing to tell him where to go. He walked forward and pushed through two ornate black doors located at the end of the big room. Another big room greeted him but this one had a huge throne on a dais and dark drapes on all of the walls. He sat on a stone bench just inside the door and prepared to wait.

“Take this,” the voice floated out of his haversack.

“Who are you and what is this?”

“I am Mr. E, Georg’s friend from the taiga, remember?”

“Of course I remember you Mr. E! You are here helping me?”

“Georg sent me. Well he did not know that he sent me but because of his GPS machine he did. I will explain later. For now we need to clear this space and go home.”

“Just like that?” Wellington could not believe it

“As you surmised, you are in the latest lair of Black Veil. He took over this place and turned everything dark but if we turn it back to its natural green he will be forced to retreat and the rest of the land will also return to normal.”

“How will we do that?”

“By putting this smaragdine rock in the dog’s mouth. I put a freeze spell on him which I will release when he is near Black Veil. His saliva will remove the dark covering from the true emerald color of the stone and the closeness of so much strong color will be enough to send Black Veil back to his underground lair. His magic is not as powerful as he would believe.”

“And the Emerald City will be released and Toto can get Dorothy and take her back to Kansas!” Wellington was elated. “Just like in the book.”

Mr. E, formally known in scientific circles as Mr. Edward Edward, grinned. He loved his job.



Chapter 8

Caught!

Benji and Hop and Topsy approached the bunny ward. It was a complex of tiny huts called Quonset huts. They were arch shaped and made of metal with a covered porch and a door at one flat end and a window at the other. The sides were solid. All of the huts were connected to each other by a long winding concrete sidewalk. Twelve bunnies and one supervisor lived in each hut. In the middle of the complex was a small cinderblock building that was actually a big ice box. Perishable foods were stored here. These were given out at meals which the bunnies usually ate in their own huts or outside on the porches. Beyond the cold items, which were usually cheeses or sometimes ice cream, the bunnies had to find their own food in the fields that surrounded the ward.

There was one larger hut to the side of the circular complex of huts where all the bunnies could assemble for a lecture. Once a week, on Saturday morning, a movie was shown in this big hut. This was most ward bunnies favorite time at the ward. The movies were fun and there were special snacks donated by the town.

The large hut also held the administrative offices and this was where Benji and the bunnies headed. They entered the hut and Hop pointed to the headmaster's door which was open. Benji approached it and tapped on the door frame, not wanting to just walk in unannounced as well as unexpected.

"Come in," a voice boomed.

Benji stepped into the office, slowly followed by the two bunnies. He extended his paw, "Hello, I'm Benjamin Bunny, returning two of your wards." The headmaster looked up from the paper he was reviewing.

"Headmaster Athelstan. Glad to meet you." He extended a massive paw across the desk to shake with Benji. At the same time his gaze was settling on the two bunnies standing in the doorway.

"Martin? Lydia? What have you gotten yourselves into now?"

"Martin? Lydia?" Benji turned to the two bunnies. "I thought you told me your names were Hop and Topsy."

"Well," the bunny called Martin shuffled his feet.

"Sniff," the bunny called Lydia started to cry.

"Ha Ha!" chuckled the headmaster. "I see you two are at it again. Hop & Topsy, eh? I'm rather liking those names. The best yet. You ought to consider keeping them." He shifted his attention to Benji. "And they told you about the harsh treatment they suffer here, right?" His deep blue eyes twinkled behind massive horn rimmed glasses. Benji wondered fleetingly if horn-rimmed glasses were coming back in style.

Benji was beginning to get the picture. "Oh yes, sir. Very harsh. So harsh that I do believe these bunnies deserve some special treatment. I know you did not mean for such harshness to go

on right under your nose, but you do have an exceeding large population in this ward and cannot be on top of every single thing.”

Martin and Lydia listened to the exchange with rapt fascination.

The headmaster nodded his head. “Yes, we are over populated. There’s so much more human farming going on these days. And every orphan bunny wants to be in Willis Ward. It keeps us sorely understaffed and sadly, some things slip by that simply should not be happening.”

“So if a story of harsh treatment were reported, you would certainly deal with the offending parties with comparable harshness?”

“Most certainly! We take very good care of our wards here. I tolerate no uncivil treatment of our youngsters.”

“And what might the punishment be for, say doling out excessive chores and unnecessary work?” Benji was enjoying their dialogue almost as much as the headmaster. Martin and Lydia continued to watch with riveted attention.

“Lashes with wet noodles would be my inclination for such travesty. But that is treating incivility with incivility. Expulsive from the job is a better solution. We have no room for such rabbits here.”

“Then we have a report to make,” Benji glanced back briefly at Martin and Lydia and rushed on. “There has been an offense that must be punished.” Benji turned to Martin and Lydia. “Speak up. Don’t be shy. This puts an end to all of your troubles.”

Martin looked ashen. Tears rolled down Lydia’s cheeks.

“There, there, it’s wonderful that Headmaster Athelstan is going to solve your dilemma. No more young rabbits will have to suffer silly chores or repeats,” Benji pulled Martin forward. “Speak now. Tell the headmaster who wronged you.”

“I,” Martin spoke in a low voice, “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Benji stepped back to where Lydia was standing and knelt down. “Topsy, eh Lydia, maybe your memory is better?” Benji lifted her chin. “Headmaster is waiting for names.”

“We made it up,” she barely whispered, swallowing the last words.

“You what? I did not hear you. Tell me again.”

“We Made It Up!!” shouted Martin. “We made it all up. You tricked us. You knew we made it up. You are making Lydia cry. You are mean!”

“I see,” said Headmaster Athelstan. “We are mean and yet you would have me fire a hard worker because you made up a story about how poorly she was doing her job?”

“NO! We would not. You said the part about firing. We just wanted to play and not do chores.”

“Well, well, well,” said Benji. “Bunnies that do not like chores. Bunnies that run away and then make up tales of woe about their life in the ward. Whatever shall we do?”

“Very troubling,” Headmaster Athelstan looked grim. Martin looked glum. Lydia started shaking. “But I have a plan.”

“Do tell,” said Benji. “Something to do with wet noodles?”

“No, nothing as simple as that.”

Now the two little bunnies were becoming hysterical and clinging to each other. “We’re sorry. We won’t do it again. We didn’t mean to get anyone in trouble.”

“My plan is this.” Here the headmaster arose from his desk and stepped around it to gather both bunnies in his arms. “But first, quiet yourselves, young ones. You have suffered enough. This conclusion to your latest excursion seems to have taught you a valuable lesson. Personal gain at the expense of others is no good.”

“Yes, sir,” Martin’s muffled voice sounded in the headmaster’s sleeve. Lydia nodded her head up and down vigorously.

“So this is my proposal. With your approval, of course,” Headmaster Athelstan directed this to Benji. “You will report daily to Benjamin and do as he directs you for two full weeks. Each. Two weeks of any chores that Benjamin wants to assign you.”

Martin lifted his head, “Really?” Lydia began to smile. She struggled from the headmaster’s arms and rushed to Benji, hugging him. Just like that, it looked like their plans to be with Benji and Bethleann and Georg might happen after all. And with no punishment!

“I like your way of thinking, Headmaster Athelstan,” laughed Benji. “I approve of and accept your offer. I do have some things these two youngsters can help me with. I definitely do.”



Chapter 9

Action

“Just one thing, kids,” said Benji as they wound their way back to the cottage, “I am having trouble thinking of you as Martin and Lydia, lovely names they be.”

“How about if you stick with Hop and Topsy then?” suggested Martin. “We don’t mind. Headmaster is right. They’re two of our better names.”

“You have that many?”

“Every excursion we gave ourselves new names, but these are the best.”

“Did you go on that many excursions?”

“We got bored,” said Topsy. “We actually finished our chores faster than anyone because we worked together and playing in the fields around the ward got to be so lame.”

“Running away is bad form,” admonished Benji.

“Yeah, we learned today that it can get you into more trouble than it’s worth,” said Hop.

The cottage came into sight. “Race you to the gate,” called Benji, getting a head start. The three arrived at about the same moment. “Nice sprint, kids. You two are sharp on your toes.”

“I’m out of breath,” panted Hop

“I’m dehydrated,” said Topsy.

“Let’s get some spring water. Come on around back.” Benji led the way to the outdoor hand pump. “Georg, Bethleann! We’re back and guess what? These two have to do our bidding for two solid weeks, so get your lists ready.”

Bethleann’s heel and elbow popped open the screen door, “You don’t say!” she called over her shoulder, “I can certainly use a hand getting ready for the wedding. I still haven’t found the right dress, there’s the menu to plan, flowers to gather, telebee invitations to send...the list goes on and on.”

“Telebees?” asked Hop. “What about twitters?”

“What’s a twitter?” asked Bethleann as she pushed the door open wider to reveal a tray of chocolate chip cookies in one hand and a pitcher of milk in the other. Topsy hurried over to help her, reaching for the tray of cookies.

“Everyone when they get word of this wedding,” grinned Benji.

“Twitter is the new way of sending notes,” Hop ignored Benji’s weak joke. “The bluebirds started it,” Hop continued. “It’s so easy. You don’t need a leaf or anything. You just tell your message to the bluebird messenger and where it needs to go. It’s tweeted just like that. It’s free. The birds have sponsors to cover their costs.”

“Wow,” said Bethleann, “the birds, and the bees. We could use both and save some money. Georg will like that.” She headed back to the kitchen for the bowl of apple and cheese slices that she had prepared.

Topsy followed to get a stack of glasses for the milk. “You could tweet most of the invitations and use telebees for those special folks who might want to save their telebee leaf,”

suggested Topsy. "Tweets are so easy. We tweet all of the time at the ward." The gals returned from the kitchen with the fruit, glasses and a vase of fresh flowers for the table.

"You kids are really up on things," admired Benji.

"Yup," said Hop. "Easy way to chat with our friends from home."

"So how did you accomplish the impossible?" asked Bethleann, referring to the kids' dilemma resolution as she poured everyone a small glass of milk.

"Well, it was a bit tricky," said Benji, not elaborating as he sat down in a wooden chair, "but we got the job done."

"So what's the plan to rescue Wellington?" asked Hop, ready for action.

"While you were gone, Georg worked on that," Bethleann picked up a slice each of cheese and apple. "He's making a few adjustments now and will be right out."

"Bethleann, let me show you this," Georg pushed through the door, head down in a chart he was holding. "Oh, hi, gang. See you made it back. Any problems?"

"Not really," replied Benji, taking a bite out of a warm cookie. "Headmaster Athelstan is actually quite a savvy guy. We had a few minor details to iron out is all. Bethleann says you have a plan."

"I do," declared Georg, scooping three slices of apple and cheese from the bowl. He savored his snack for a moment and then proceeded, "we'll divide into groups. Bethleann and Topsy will be group one and check Wellington's last delivery stop. Benji and Hop will be group two and take the closet route to see if anything is amiss there. And I will monitor your progress from here via the GPS scanner I've been developing. I did want to test it before putting it into real action but we need it now."

"GPS scanner?" asked Benji.

"Stands for get positron space. It locates things."

"Why can't it locate Wellington then?" asked Topsy.

"Because you need to swallow a bilateral bean, BiB for short, for it to beam in on. They are very hard to conjure and I only had time to get two, one for each team. The effect only lasts for a few hours at most, sometimes less, so you want to swallow the bean when you feel like you are really hot on the right trail. You will have to decide which team member gets the bean when the time comes." He handed a BiB to Bethleann and one to Benji.

"Boy, this had better work," said Benji. "I'm really getting worried about Wellington."

"Me too," said Bethleann. "Come on, Topsy, let's not waste any more time." Bethleann could work a magic spell as well as Georg, and also like Georg and Wellington she used her magic sparingly. But this was a time to throw caution aside and get to the last spot Wellington was known to be, and fast.

Bethleann marched into the field after giving Georg a hearty kiss and tossed a hand wave to the boys. Topsy followed timidly but with a charged up spirit. She was going on a real adventure at last. No more excursions pretending to be adventures with Hop. This was the real thing.

"Hold my hand and keep your arms down. You'll feel a bit of a tingle but nothing else." Bethleann lifted her wand, spoke a few words and instantly they were gone.

“Off we go, too, then,” said Benji. He and Hop headed to the wardrobe in Uncle Wells’ study.

“This is a real sleuth’s room,” declared Hop, looking around the huge study with all of its amenities. “I could be an awesome investigator with all of this to help me.”

“Indeed,” said Benji. “And you will get to help Wellington after we find him. He would welcome a new sleuth to solve mysteries.”

They approached the wardrobe and opened the tiny door. “Good-bye, Georg,” Benji called out to the bear, still lingering outside. “We’ll check in soon.” Benji and Hop stepped into the wardrobe and uneventfully on through to the door and stairs beyond. The coats, no longer enchanted, were busy doing manicures and gossiping. “Cheeta Would?” a flaming pink one mused dreamily. “I do believe I remember him visiting me once, but I wouldn’t swear to it.”

Georg gathered up the snack leftovers, making sure there were no broken cookies that needed tending, and took everything to the kitchen for a quick wash up, after which he headed to the study to turn on the scanner. He was certain it would be a while before the scanner picked up anything, but he was already nervous enough about its performance to risk making a mistake on any other aspect of its performance.

Ping! Ping! Ping! Georg could not believe it. The scanner should not be picking up anything so soon. Ping! Ping! Ping! The scanner kept indicating a hit. Georg turned a few knobs and located the source of the pinging. “This can’t be. It just can’t be.”



Chapter 10

The Wedding

Georg looked at his GPS machine. He tapped it. Nothing changed. "Surely I cannot be seeing this." He shook the machine. Still nothing changed. He knew it was still in the developmental stage, but this was too odd. He had sent the teams out to find Wellington and instead he was locked on the missing rabbit.

The way the machine worked was that after it fixed on the position of a BiB, it could visually zero in on the area around the BiB and whoever was operating the machine could, if need be, use the machine to separate the atoms of an object or person, pull them through the air to the location of the machine and reassemble them. It was truly innovative and Georg was very pleased with himself. But he knew the machine had a lot of work to reach perfection. Dare he try to bring Wellington, and who was that with him anyway? Georg looked closer... "Furballs! That's Mr. E with Wellington! I'll bet he's behind the mystery bilateral bean."

Georg still hesitated. He took a deep breath. "I have no choice. They need my help. Sir Boris obviously provided Mr. E with a BiB and they must have felt it was a dire situation since they know my machine is still very new." He pressed the separation button and watched as Wellington and Mr. E disappeared from the screen. He noticed a small dog look around and then run off on what seemed to be an important mission of his own since he never looked back. There was a lot of dust, and as he watched, things began to turn a brilliant green. "This is going to be some story to hear," he chuckled.

Georg calculated the time from that location to his and reasoned the separated atoms should be arriving. He touched the reassemble button. "Please work!"

"Wheezy, I feel wheezy," Wellington appeared and instantly sat down on his haunches. Then he looked around. "Georg! Is that you?" He looked some more. "Am I really home?"

Beside him sat an equally groggy Mr. E. "Needs some work, Georg, but coming along," he muttered, and then passed out.

"Mr. E!" Georg rushed to the cricket's side. "Wake up, Mr. E." He gently shook his dear friend.

"Georg," Mr. E's eyes fluttered open. "Your GPS will make magic obsolete."

"Aw, I hardly think so, sir. Magic can do so many more things," but Georg was pleased that Mr. E thought so highly of his invention.

"We've been so worried about you, Wellington. Bethleann and Benji and Hop and Topsy are out looking for you right now."

"Hop and Topsy?" asked Wellington.

Georg could see there was a lot of catching up to do. "I do think we all need some tea and a snack. Maybe even a meal."

"Oh my goodness! That was some explosion," Benji and Hop came tumbling out of the wardrobe closet right into the middle of the room. "Sorry, Georg, we didn't have time to use

your BiB. Things got hot down there really fast,” the words flowed out of from Benji. “I’m sorry we let you down. Maybe we’ll never find Wellington.”

“If you looked up you would,” Wellington grinned.

“Wellington!” Benji jumped up to hug his dear friend and then stopped. He and Hop were both covered from head to paw with dust. There was even dust in their ears and throats. The hug would have to wait until after a good bathing.

“What happened to you two?” asked Georg.

“We were approaching the lair of Black Veil and all was so quiet that we figured he was somewhere else. And just like that a huge boom rang through the passageway and all of a sudden black rabbits were everywhere running around like they were lost. They were trying to talk to each other in some apparent urshrache. I could only make out a word here and there.”

“Yeah, it was great! They were babbling like babies.” Hop’s eyes were huge.

Benji continued, “I knew we could never find Wellington, even if he was there, until the dust and confusion settled.” Benji rubbed his eyes. “And it was enough of an adventure for Hop.” Hop thought about scowling at Benji but changed his mind. After all, it had been a real adventure, even if cut short.

“You made the right choice,” Georg said. “I sure hope Bethleann is okay.”

“Did I hear my name?” Bethleann and Topsy walked into the study. “Wellington! You’re found!” She embraced the rabbit and gave him a big kiss. “Good job Benji and Hop.”

“We didn’t do it,” said Hop dejectedly. “He did,” he pointed to Mr. E.

“Mr. E,” Bethleann scooped up the friendly cricket and gave him a welcome hug. “You found Wellington?” She looked at Georg who nodded.

“Did you have a big adventure?” Hop asked Topsy, not wanting to hear how she and Bethleann had done awesome things while all he got to do was rush home after a little explosion.

“No, not really,” Topsy had a let-down look. “When we got to the home where Wellington had been last, everything was as it should be. And so we looked around the area. We found an angry farmer who was fuming about a rabbit trespassing in his field and then floating away like a kite.”

“And I knew that he was talking about Wellington, and that he was not going to be found anywhere near the village. So we headed back here to regroup,” Bethleann finished.

“All’s well that ends well,” said Wellington. “I’m famished. Let’s fix some dinner and plan a wedding.” He took each of the youngsters by the hand, “You must be Hop and you must be Topsy,” he looked at each, guessing correctly. “Tell me how you found your way to Wells Way.”

“Hop can tell you his side of the story soon,” said Benji. “Right now we both have an appointment with a tub,” he guided Hop toward the stairs. “Don’t eat without us.”

“Wells Way?” asked Bethleann.

“Yes, while I was floating along, I decided that this place needs a good name to put with the wedding invitations. What do you think of Wells Way?”

“I like it,” said Georg.

“Me too,” said Bethleann. “And speaking of the wedding, Topsy, would you like to sleep over here and go shopping with me first thing tomorrow? You can stay too, Hop,” she called up

the stairs, “and be ready to help Georg and Benji get the garden trimmed and mowed.” The kids, one upstairs and one down, both jumped up and down for joy. Adventures and sleepovers! Two of their favorite things. This punishment was going well.

Soon the kitchen was a bustle of activity. Before they left for Easter deliveries, George had prepared a meatloaf, and he popped it in the oven. He liked for all the ingredients to have plenty of time to blend their flavors before cooking the tasty course. Bethleann prepared a salad, her specialty. Mr. E offered to make popovers and no one protested. Wellington gathered some green beans from the garden and set them to steaming. Topsy prepared the tea under Bethleann’s guidance. While the meal cooked the table was set. A lovely sunset was settling on the horizon when all was done. Two very clean rabbits hopped down the stairs and into the dining room. “Perfect. We’re all here,” said Wellington. “Let’s eat.”

“And coordinate our lists,” said Georg. He was ready to get married.

The days that followed were filled with shopping trips, dispatching invitations and arranging the gift display. Menu planning brought on much discussion. It was decided early on that Master Culper at the Doggone Tea Room & Inn was just the one they needed to take charge of the food. With the help of his able assistant, Miss Hilarey, it would be a fabulous feast. Even more so now that Lewis the Legendary decided to hang up his wizard’s hat and join forces with the two. His cakes were legendary. Precisely would provide the music. Sir Andrew and the Ball collected a huge sack of rice grains to shower the newlyweds. Stephen Storke delivered packages daily from all over, to the point of exhaustion. Most were gifts but some were decorations and favors for the party that was to follow the ceremony. Count Donald was going to perform the service. Emily Elf offered to plan a special honeymoon trip with Mr. E’s help.

The day of the wedding was the most beautiful ever. The temperature was slightly warmer than a May day usually provided, but no one complained. Wellington escorted Bethleann down the garden’s freshly mowed aisle. She made a beautiful bride in her candlelight satin peau de soie princess style dress. The Alencon lace, seed pearls and crystals that trimmed the tiny pin tucks along the sleeves and around the jewel neckline were just the right touch. She was a vision of loveliness to Georg, resplendent in cutaway tails. They were a fairy tale couple and so in love. Everyone felt the tremendous joy of the day and celebrated well into the night, even after a very happy but tired Bethleann and Georg had been whisked away by Mr. E and Emily Elf.

“What a wonderful day,” sighed Wellington after the last guest had left. He and Benji were sitting in the garden watching for shooting stars. Hop and Topsy had gone to bed on their own earlier. They were worn out bunnies. Wellington breathed deeply and leaned back in his chair with his arms wrapped comfortably behind his neck, “I can say that I am one very contented rabbit.”

Epilogue

After the wedding, some housing changes were made which all were happy about. Georg and Bethleann settled in at Wells Way which delighted Wellington to no end. He returned to his beloved cottage with no guilt feelings about neglecting Uncles Wells' beautiful home. It was in good hands. And Benji took over Georg's little cottage for his very own first home.

Mr. E decided that he needed to stay in Willis Warren with an occasional return to the taiga and Sir Boris for chats and advice. But Georg needed on hand help with the GPS refinements and he was the one to do it. He was a cricket of simple means and made himself a cozy nest above the shed where Stormy resided.

Bethleann and Georg decided to adopt Hop and Topsy. The two young bunnies could not believe their good fortune. Living with Bethleann and Georg meant endless adventures, they were sure of it! And they decided that they would not even complain about chores.

"Georg," said Bethleann one summer day after all the moving and sorting had been finished to everyone's satisfaction. They were sitting on the lawn sipping lemonade with their pals, playing cards and wondering when the next breeze would break the oppressive heat. It was a lazy time for the gang, a time they all looked forward to after their usual busy spring. There was not one among the group who did not relish a hearty adventure turned out well, but the do nothing days of summer were blissful.

"Bethleann," returned Georg, smiling.

"I was wondering what you thought about Sebastian?"

"Amaretta."

"So if it's a girl we'll name her Amaretta since it has always been your favorite name for a girl, Georg. And if it's a boy, he'll be Sebastian."

"Deal."

Wellington looked from one to the other. "Does this mean?"

"Yes," said Georg. "Easter season; well, a bit before."

"Hooray," shouted Wellington.

"A baby?" squeaked Topsy. "Twins?"

"No!" said Bethleann and Georg together.

"One at a time," said Bethleann. "One at a time. You two are twins enough!"

