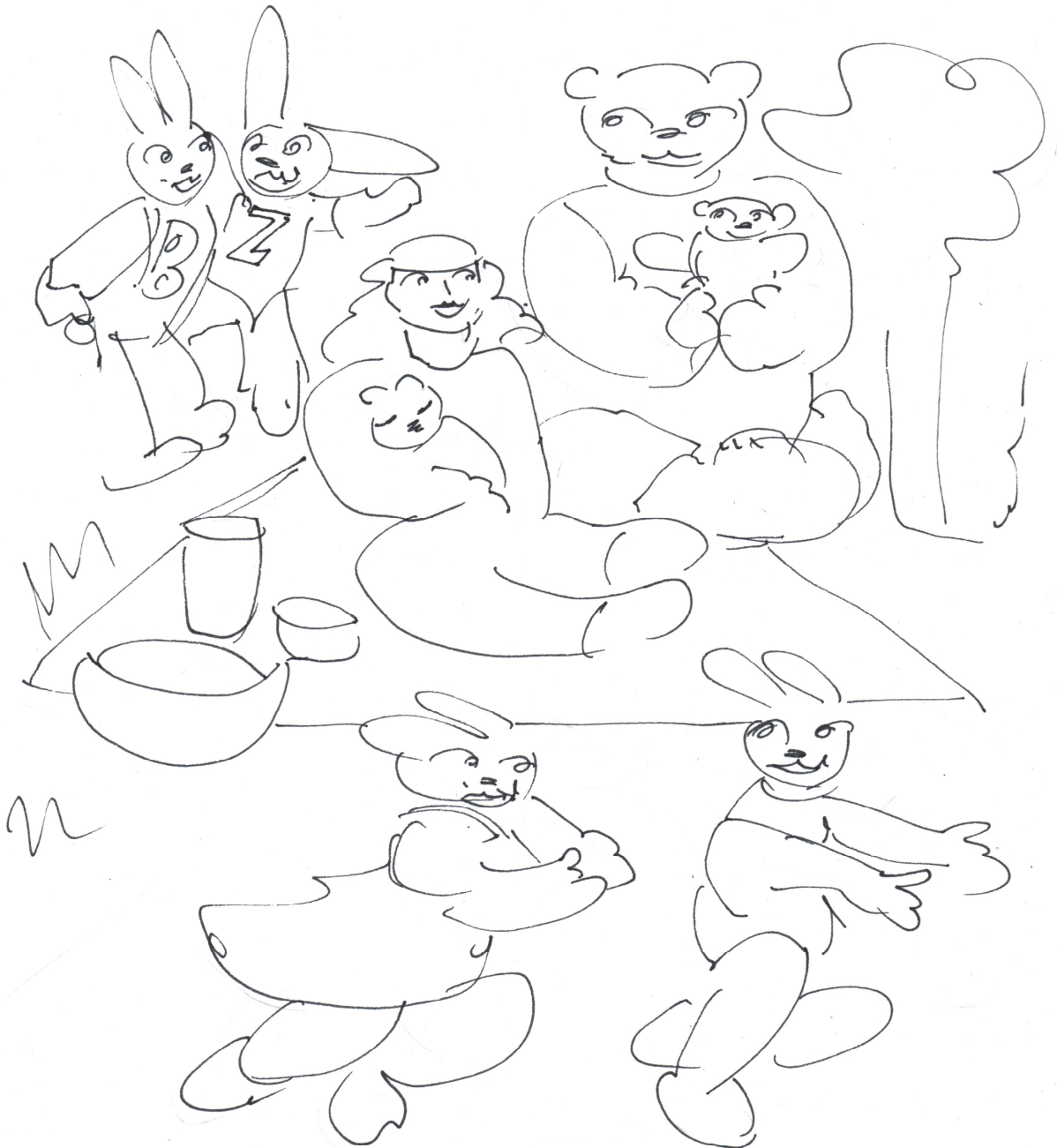


WELLINGTON RABBIT

THYME AFTER TIME



Written and Illustrated by
Sandra Leigh Jett Ball

For granddaughter Marie Kelly Ball
Who smiles from head to toe

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

Copyright © 2012 by Sandra Leigh Jett Ball
Illustrations © 2012 by Sandra Leigh Jett Ball
Back cover Wellington photograph by Joan Willis
All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce
this book or portions thereof in any form.

Published by Donny & Sandy Ball
at Bayside on Colington Island, North Carolina
Post Office Box 3324, Kill Devil Hills, NC 27948
252-441-5351 800-723-3057
www.sandraballart.com

ISBN x-xxxxxxx-x-x

Table of Contents

Preface		4
Chapter 1	Black Evil	7
Chapter 2	Zachary	11
Chapter 3	The Name Game	15
Chapter 4	Here and There	19
Chapter 5	Oops	23
Chapter 6	Hopabout	27
Chapter 7	Time's A Wasting	31
Chapter 8	A Problem	35
Chapter 9	A Trick or Two	39
Chapter 10	Promises	43
Epilogue		46

Index to Illustrations

Where did that rabbit go?	6
You're THE Easter Bunny?	10
I don't like you at all	14
Hold on tight, Martin!	18
There's money in the banana stand	22
Mr E meets Lance	26
Mr E has his doubts	30
A family outing	34
What do we do now?	38
The magic shoes	42

Preface

So much is beginning to happen in the story, and so many setbacks are occurring to hinder Wellington's progress. It's hard for me to keep up. A friend recently asked me where my favorite place to write is and I told her that the best writing gets done on my runs or bike rides. I just throw the questions out there and wait. It usually takes about thirty minutes of hard running or biking before the answers flow in. "So that's what they're doing," I marvel, always amazed.

The dialog for the lion shark fight is lifted almost directly from *The Other Guys* script with just a few tweaks. When we saw the movie during summer camp, nephew Jake turned to me as that scene was happening and mouthed, "Lydia and Martin!" I had just had the same revelation and so it seemed perfect to include it in the book.

The note Benji reads is one Lydia wrote to Emily and is purely delightful.

Lance the leprechaun is named after a real life 'son' and friend, Lewis' college roommate, Lance. There is a bit of the real Lance in the leprechaun Lance.

Leprechauns did traditionally wear red when they were first introduced into literature. They are also the only mythical creature to earn a living, being cobblers as well as mischief makers. Far darrigs and clurichauns are related mythical creatures with characteristics much as described in the story.

It's always fun for these small press print runs to weave in comments about current movies and television shows and characters as I think that years from now it will give a reference point to what was going on in the world entertainment wise.

The "There's always money in the banana stand" arc came from *Arrested Development*, a great and well written television comedy. George Bluth, Sr. always told the kids there was money in the banana stand. They thought that he meant that hard work selling frozen bananas would make them money. He actually meant that he hid all of the family cash in the banana stand and when it burned down in an episode called *Top Banana* their savings went up in smoke. Their money was in the walls. In our story, the money is under towels in the ceiling. This came from the true story involving Anderson's Store that used to be on the beach road. During the March 7, 1962 Ash Wednesday Storm Charles Nunemaker and his brother rescued Bill and Inez Anderson from the rising waters in their store and took them to Colington. After they were safe, Bill begged Nunemaker to go back and get their life savings; \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills all tucked into more than a hundred towels pinned to the ceiling of the store. Mr Nunemaker did and the Andersons retired on the rescued money.

Hilarey joins Lewis in the baking business because they actually do bake together and we all enjoy their confections. Bayside Bakery will be a reality someday.

This book is dedicated to granddaughter number two and grandchild number seven. At this writing, she has not been born yet, but that will change any day now. And then her name will be on the dedication page; meanwhile it's reserved.

Two more books and this series is complete. I know where the characters are going but not sure exactly how they will get there. More running and biking will reveal their paths.

As he was proofing the book, Donny came up with the perfect spin on the working title. And so *Time After Time* became *Thyme After Time* and gets woven into the story when, after their time travel adventures, the kids come home to smell their favorite thyme-roasted chicken cooking for dinner.

Already Donny has a plan for future books, *The Tails of Seven Cats*. We currently have seven cats and they each indeed have a tale. Remus's working title is *The Cat Who Lived Under the Couch*. He still refuses to climb much and prefers low lying areas.

Eventually when I go back and tidy up the thirteen books, correcting typos and continuity, each book will share a common preface. Now each preface tells some things about the how and why of some of the story arcs.



Chapter 1

Black Evil

“Where did he go?” Black Evil was livid. He glared around the room, eyes drilling into anyone’s that dared meet his. Conversation slowed and then stopped altogether. “Who saw that rabbit leave?”

Everyone held their breath and waited for the next tirade. Black Evil just stood there with his hands on his hips breathing hard, nostrils flared. The party guests surreptitiously looked out of the corners of their eyes at each other. Still Black Evil said nothing. He just stared. Then the guests began to murmur to each other softly. “What is he talking about this time? Who is he talking about?” They all knew their king too well. He was always on some sort of rant or another. He threw a great party but could throw a greater fit at any moment without any apparent provocation. The best idea when that happened was to steer clear of him until his mood changed, which could revert to jovial as quickly as it left. The parties he threw were good enough to risk the wrath of the king. They were stellar beyond imagination.

“Did no one see that rabbit leave?” Black Evil finally bellowed. “Unbelievable. What a bunch of nincompoops. All you do is eat my food, drink my wines and when I ask a simple question that requires a simple answer, you act like I wanted you to design a time travel machine.”

“I believe he left the room, your highness,” offered one brave soul.

“Of course he left the room!”

“You mean the chap with the Dr. Who watch?” asked another.

“Yes, idiot. Who else would I be talking about?”

“Maybe he went to the loo.”

“Maybe he went to the dance room.”

“Well, spread out and search. Don’t just stand there.”

Black Evil sat down, leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. No one at his table dared speak, or move. They all sat silently.

Guests began taking token looks under tables, even though they were floating and the floor visible. Then they gradually returned to eating the elaborate foods, a nibble here, a nibble there. They knew that Black Evil’s mood would not change no matter what they did until he was good and ready. It would be a shame to waste this party spread.

Conversations started up in low tones but all the while guests glanced around as though the missing rabbit would appear in their sight at just that moment and elevate them into Black Evil’s eternal good graces.

The guests at Black Evil’s table began hushed pantomimes with their neighbors and signaled for waiters to bring sample platters. No one even dared think about getting up from the table to mingle with friends.

The rabbit dressed in red satin offered to go check the dance room. “Be snappy about it, Red Satin,” Black Evil admonished eyes still closed.

Black Evil sighed, opened his eyes, and saw that the party had resumed although the guests were much subdued. “Fools,” he muttered. “Look at them,” he said to no one in particular. “They think that everything is handed to them on a silver platter. They have no idea how hard I worked to get where I am today. Where is Red Satin?” he sighed again. “Must I do everything for myself?”

“He should be wearing red velvet,” a voice at Black Evil’s side said.

“What did you say?”

“Red Satin should be dressed in velvet. Then he could be called Red Velvet, like the cake. Ha ha ha ha!”

“That is pathetic, Bummy. This is what I am paying you for? Weak, pathetic jokes like that?”

Bummy looked away. He thought his joke was clever. Now he was going to be fired. And he had just gotten this job. He shook his head. And he thought he would be so good at this court jester business.

Red Satin came back from the dance room to report that no one had seen the mysterious stranger. “Why aren’t you wearing velvet?” boomed Black Evil, sitting up in his chair. “Then we could call you Red Velvet. Get it? Like the cake. Ha ha ha ha!”

“Black Evil’s laugh is as fake as he is,” thought Bummy.

“Bummy here makes quite a clever joke,” Black Evil patted Bummy on the back. “Best court jester I’ve ever had. Beats you, Red,” this directed at the rabbit in the red satin suit.

Bummy looked surprised. Red Satin used to be court jester? He didn’t get fired? He just got reassigned? That was encouraging. Maybe Black Evil was okay after all, once you learned to stay clear of his mood swings.

Everyone at the table laughed nervously. “Bummy,” Black Evil said, pressing his paws together.

“Sir?”

“No one else seems to be able to get the job done. I need that rabbit. We have unfinished business. Bring him to me,” he laughed a wicked laugh. “I’m hankering for some fresh rabbit stew. He’s cooked his goose running out on me like that. I know he was that Wellington rabbit. And after I featured him in my book, *Rabbits of Fame and Fortune*, too. Take Clyde with you.”

Bummy squirmed. Clyde was a bad rabbit, almost as bad as Black Evil. “Clyde should be heading up this search,” muttered Bummy, “not me.”

“What did you just say?”

“Ummm...Clyde and me that’s the way to do a search. Yes siree.”

“Quit being so funny. You’ve got a new job now. And look at me when I’m talking to you. Well, don’t just sit there. Get going.”

Bummy stood up, “Bunny and Clyde will get the job done.”

“Very funny, Bummy,” Black Evil slapped Bummy on the back. “You’re a real fountain of humor.” Bummy thought it was a perfectly good play on words.

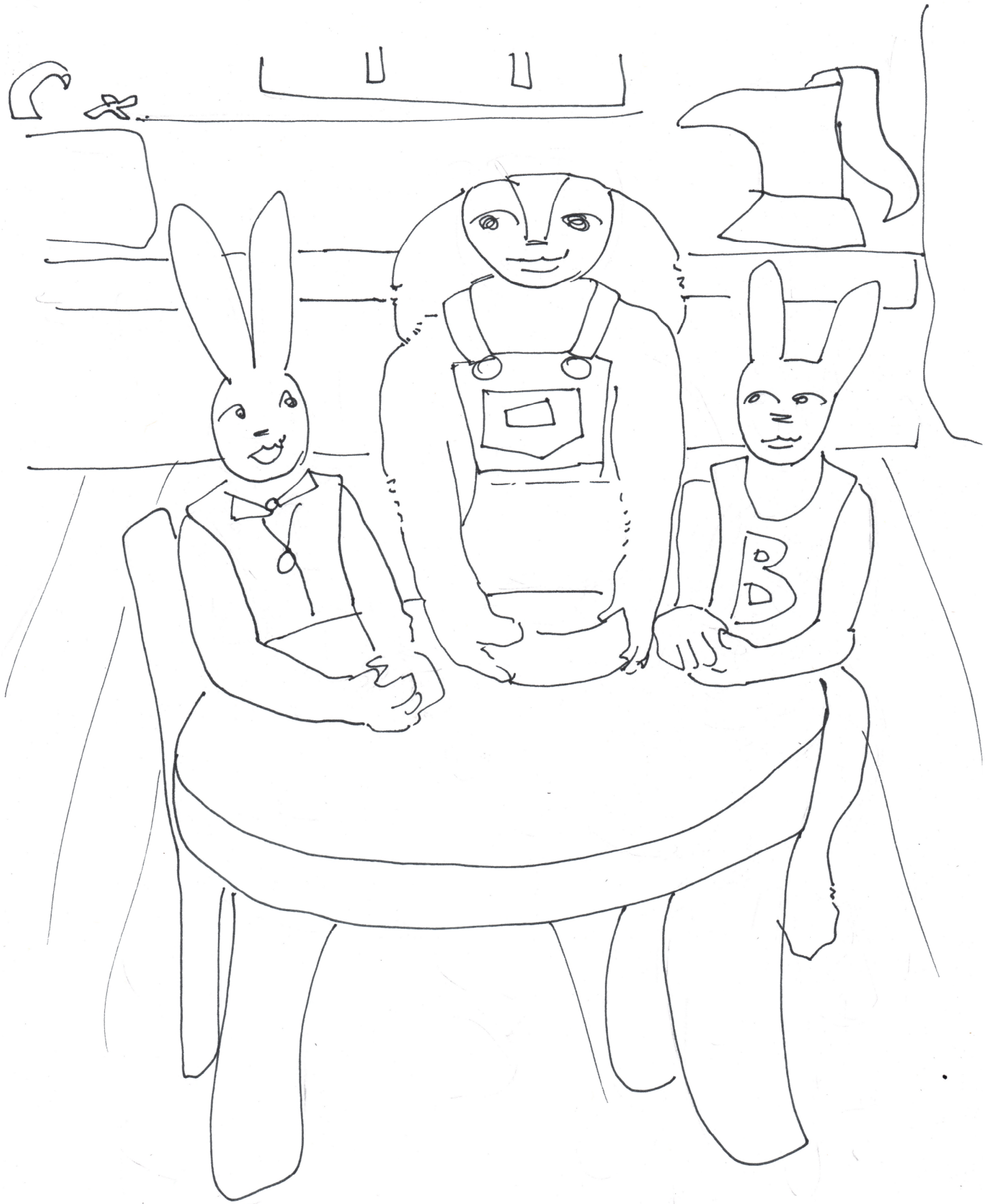
He tried one parting joke, “We’ll be back faster than you can say Jack Rabbit.”

Black Evil cuffed him on the ear. “Weak and watery. Whoever told you that you could make jokes was playing a joke on you. You’ve got no talent at all.”

Bummy hopped away from the table, Black Evil's words smarting in his head. He had talent. He just knew it. He had won Jokester of the Year back home, twice. "Oh well," he sighed, "a job's a job, best get this new one done." He figured Clyde was probably in the dance room where Mr. Smarty Pants was playing. Those gals in the band were lookers.

Black Evil called after Bummy. "Bunny and Clyde, eh? Hey B-u-n-n-y," Black Evil emphasized the word. "Don't forget your wig and mini-dress. Clyde likes his women hot."

Bummy shot Black Evil a tiny look, one just enough to get his annoyance across without getting him in trouble. "Good idea, your highness." Actually, Bummy thought that dressing like a gal might be a good idea. He'd borrow some stuff from Marty's gals.



Chapter 2

Zachary

“Zachary?” responded a puzzled Wellington looking at the small rabbit standing in the doorway. His brain was too tired to do much thinking. “You belong to Benji?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the tiny rabbit. “Well, I belong to the bunny you call Benji. Mom named him Thackary but he never took to it. We’re twins you see, Zachary and Thackery,” he added. “Is he here? That wizard guy said that he lived here under the name of Benji. Kinda like that name better. Zachary and Thackery is rather a mouthful.”

“Indeed he does. Thackery, huh, funny he never mentioned that. But where are my manners? Have you been traveling long? Please come in. Excuse me, I’ve just finished a very rewarding but tiring job and I’m not quite myself. Actually Benji was helping me too.” Wellington babbled on as he ushered Zachary into the foyer.

“Benji!” Wellington called out over his shoulder. “You have a guest!” Wellington decided to keep the exact nature of the guest a surprise.

“Wizard guy you say? Didn’t know that Chef Lewis was telling folks about his wizarding days. Thought he was finished with all of that and preferred not to talk too much about it.”

“Oh, he didn’t talk about it,” replied Zachary, rising on his toes smartly. “I recognized him even without his hat and cloak on. I’d know Lewis the Legendary anywhere,” Zachary’s voice took on a star-struck quality. “But I didn’t let on that I knew who he was. I could tell he’s not up for talking about those days.”

Zachary sure could talk a lot, thought Wellington. Almost as much as Benji who just then came bounding down the stairs, backpack in hand. “Who’s here, Wellin....Zachary!” Benji dropped his pack and rushed to hug his brother. “You’re here! Let me look at you. It’s been too long! Oh my gosh, you’re actually here, in Willis Warren at Wells Way. Can you stay? We’ve got lots of room.”

Zachary looked carefully at his brother. “It really is you!” he exclaimed, giving Benji a huge hug back. “Can I really stay here with you?” He looked at Benji hopefully.

Benji grinned. “If you like. I’m sure Bethleann and Georg won’t mind. We’ll ask now.”

“Enough foyer chatter boys,” interrupted Wellington. “Put your pack here, Zachary,” Wellington indicated a hook on a beautiful bench style hall tree, “and let’s go find some food for you. Surely you’re starving.”

“Oh, that would be so wonderful. I really wanted to every bun in sight they all looked and smelled so good but I wanted to find Benji as fast as I could, so I did not buy even a bun to go.”

“You definitely must be ravenous then,” piped in Benji. “Wellington makes an omelet to die for and his teas are out of this world.”

The three headed for the kitchen chatting merrily as they went.

“Did you enter the signal corps like you always talked about?” Benji asked Zachary.

“I did indeed. I traveled the world with the corps and just recently mustered out and decided to look you up. We all lost touch with you after you signed on with Black Veil.”

“He was not one for letting you keep contact with your family as I found out,” sighed Benji. “So many things about that job turned out to be a lot different than what the description stated. Boy did I learn a lesson the hard way. It was Wellington and his friends that helped me get back on track.”

“Don’t let Benji sell himself short, Zach,” smiled Wellington. “He was a huge help and risked everything to successfully rescue us from the perils of Black Veil. It was easy to see his kind nature had been tricked by that rabbit.”

While Wellington gathered ingredients for omelets and set the tea to brewing, Benji filled Zachary in on life in Willis Warren. He related how Wells Way was bequeathed to Wellington by his beloved Uncle Wells years ago before he faded to the land of the WEB. And how they all lived here now, except for Wellington, who had his own tiny cottage nearby.

“The WEB?” questioned Zach.

“Yes, it is a magical place beyond here where all former Easter bunnies go. But before they go they title a new Easter Bunny.” With an agreeable nod from Wellington, Benji went on.

“Before he faded, Uncle Wells picked Wellington for the job.”

“THE Easter Bunny?” yelled Zach. “I’m eating in the kitchen of THE Easter Bunny?”

“Well, when you put it like that, I guess you are,” pondered Benji, never really stopping to think about the enormous significance of Wellington’s title. Wellington was just, well Wellington. And didn’t they all help with Easter deliveries? Still, Zach had a good point. “We all help him,” said Benji.

“Yes, but, but the REAL Easter Bunny cooking me breakfast. I am so honored, sir.”

“Now there’ll be none of that,” admonished Wellington. “We respect each other around here,” he shot Benji a glance remembering a rift they had not so long ago where respect temporarily flew out the window. “But no need for formalities.”

“Yes, sir. I mean, yes, ummm...Wellington...sir,” Zach found it hard to address the esteemed rabbit in a common manner. They all laughed at Zach’s tongue tie up.

“Who do we have here?” asked Bethleann, walking into the kitchen with a sleepy baby in her arms.

“It’s my twin brother, Zachary!” explained Benji.

“Your twin brother? How wonderful!” she adjusted the baby. “It’s so good to meet you. We adore your brother. We would not know what to do without our Benji.” Benji blushed at the compliment.

“Everyone is so happy around here,” declared Zach.

Wellington, Benji and Bethleann simultaneously started chuckling at Zach’s assessment. “We have our differences,” said Wellington, “and we’re far from perfect, but it’s true we are a happy bunch.”

“Can Zach live here, Bethleann?” asked Benji. “He just finished his tour with the signal corps and he’d be a good set of hands to help with the babies.”

“Babies?” wondered Zach.

“Yes,” said Benji, “Sebastian and Edward. Edward belongs to me. Zach’s eyes widened. He started to shout. “No, no, not like that,” Benji rushed on. “I found him. It’s a big story. I’ll tell you later.”

“And Sebastian belongs to us,” just then Georg walked into the cozy kitchen holding another baby. “And who might we have here?” His gaze indicated Zachary.

Zachary looked from one baby to the other. “They look like twins. They could be twins like me and Benji.”

“You’re Benji’s twin?” asked Georg, trying to get caught up on the status of the new guest.

“I am,” beamed Zachary.

“Can he stay please?” begged Benji. “He can share my room.”

“Of course he can stay,” responded Bethleann with an agreeing nod from Georg. “And as soon as you two finish up your omelet, you can show me just how fast twins can do the laundry. Maybe twice as fast!”

Benji and Zachary danced around with glee and then dug into their piping hot omelets with gusto. “This is going to be fun!” they both grinned.

“Oh, Wellington, I almost forgot to tell you,” mumbled Zach through a mouthful of omelet. “Chef Lewis wants you to come down to the bakery. He needs to talk to you about something. He told me to tell you not to dawdle.”

“You don’t say,” mused Wellington. “Well I shan’t keep Chef Lewis waiting then. Can you two clean up this kitchen?”

“You can count on us,” the brothers chimed together.

“Indeed,” said Wellington. “Indeed!”



Chapter 3

The Name Game

“That was an awesome boundabout, Hop,” shouted Topsy as they strolled down the path toward Wells Way. The two bunnies had been on a weeklong boundabout, a rite of spring that many young rabbits plan for all winter. They take off on a camping type adventure, letting the path lead where it will. No clocks, no responsibilities besides leaving their camp sites tidy and neat, and minimum provisions. One with nature.

“I’ll say! We definitely needed a break. Those babies are cute but they sure are a lot of work. But I’m kind of surprised that Bethleann let us go, with Easter so close and all.”

“Bethleann probably wanted us out of the way, so that we would stop pestering about helping out with Easter,” mused Topsy, stopping to scratch an itch.

Hop took a sip of water from his canteen. “Well, I don’t see why we can’t help,” he pouted. “We’re responsible.” And then changing the subject, “I can’t wait to tell the others that we decided to take our original names back. That’s very responsible.”

“They’ll be so surprised!” nodded Topsy as they walked up the front stoop and entered the foyer. “Where is everybody?” The house was very quiet.

“Guess Georg and Bethleann are putting the babies to bed.”

“Let’s make some hot chocolate,” suggested Hop as he slung his backpack onto one of a series of hooks that lined the hall next to the kitchen.

Topsy hung her pack next to Hop’s and headed for the ice box to get the milk. “Those butterflies were so beautiful.”

“Yes, and how about the firefly show?” agreed Hop, putting mugs on the table and spooning chocolate into them.

“Heavenly,” sighed Topsy as she poured the milk she had heated over the chocolate. “We do need to go again soon. Maybe we’ll find a new friend like Wellington found Georg.” She was referring to Wellington finding Georg years ago on his own boundabout. Georg was from the northern taiga and landed in Willis Warren through a muffed magic spell. Uncle Wells was just about to bestow the title of Easter Bunny on Wellington and it delighted him to add Georg to the team. Georg’s duty was to scatter wish flower seeds for all the children that could not receive Easter eggs. Topsy sat down and began sipping her chocolate.

“Something smells mighty good in here.” Bethleann walked into the room holding a fussy Sea Bass and sat down.

“Would you like some chocolate?” asked Topsy.

“Love some and make a mug for Georg too. He’ll be right along.”

“Do I smell hot chocolate?” Benji dashed into the kitchen followed closely by Zachary.

“Hop! Topsy! You’re back. Meet my brother Zach.”

“Your twin brother,” Zach added.

“You have a brother? A twin brother? Why did we never know this?” Topsy looked at Benji.

“No one ever asked,” said Benji.

“We assumed you were an orphan and did not want to talk about your lost family,” said Bethleann.

“Well I never expected to see Zach again; the signal corps is so worldwide. You’re right about me not wanting to think about my family, Bethleann. I missed Zach a lot!”

“Welcome, Zach.” said Hop. “Are you staying long?”

“He’s going to live here,” blurted out Benji before Zach had a chance to answer. “Bethleann said it was fine!”

“Why, that’s great,” smiled Topsy, thinking about splitting chores with one more set of hands. “We have some news of our own.”

“What’s that?” asked Georg, sitting down so that Edward could nestle better into the folds of his arms.

“We’ve decided to take back our original names. We’re older now and more responsible. Martin and Lydia sound much more grown up than Hop and Topsy. That is if you can handle it okay, Benji.” She looked hopefully at Benji, who professed to like Hop and Topsy a bit more than Martin and Lydia when the two first came to Wells Way on probationary terms overseen by Benji.

“I really am no one to talk about names,” confessed Benji. “I’ve had more official names than anyone. And besides, I actually do like Martin and Lydia; sounds very mature. Hey,” he said switching subjects completely. “I forgot to read you my note.”

“What note?” asked Wellington, just coming in the back door from his visit to Bayside Bakery.

“A really cute one that I found at a stop while doing Easter deliveries.” Benji was still in a flush at getting to help with Easter deliveries and everything about the job intrigued him right down to the wonderful notes left by so many of the children. He read,

Dear Easter Bunny,
I am sorry I did not eat my sandwich. The bodom was wet
and spungy. Can I still have candy?

And then he showed the note around so everyone could see the unique spelling.

“That kid spells almost as good as Lydia,” snorted Martin.

“Take that back!” yelled Lydia. “I can so spell.”

“Can’t,” Martin challenged.

“I don’t like you,” fumed Lydia. “I don’t like you at all. If you were in the wild, I would attack you, even if you weren’t in my food chain. I would go out of my way to attack you. If I were a lion and you were a tuna, I would swim out in the middle of the ocean and eat you,” she seethed, arms akimbo.

“Okay, first off a lion swimming in the ocean?” Martin sneered. “Lions don’t like water. If you placed it near a river or some sort of fresh water source, that makes sense. But you find yourself in the ocean with twenty foot waves, I’m assuming off the coast of South Africa, coming up against a full grown eight-hundred pound tuna with his twenty or thirty friends, you lose that

battle, you lose that battle nine times out of ten.” Martin was on a roll. There was no stopping him. Everyone just stared, mouths hanging open. “And guess what? You’ve wandered into our school of tuna and we now have a taste of lion. We’ve talked to ourselves. We’ve communicated and said, ‘You know what? Lion tastes good. Let’s get some more lion.’ We’ve developed a system to establish a beachhead and aggressively hunt you and your family. And we will corner your pride, your children, your offspring.”

“How’re you going to do that?” By this time Lydia was more curious than livid. The rest dared not interrupt the fascinating dialogue developing.

“We will construct a series of breathing apparatus with kelp. We will be able to trap certain amounts of oxygen. It’s not going to be days at a time. An hour. Maybe an hour forty-five. No problem. That will give us enough time to figure out where you live, go back to the sea, get some more oxygen, and stalk you. You just lost at your own game. You’re outgunned and outmanned.”

Lydia stood there speechless.

Martin fired one last shot, “Did that go the way you thought it was going to go? Nope.”

“MARTIN!” Lydia picked up her mug of hot chocolate and threw the contents on him.

“Why you...” Martin leapt up, charging for her. Lydia ran across the kitchen, out the door and shot into the meadow with Martin hot on her heels.

“Stop, Lydia,” he called out when he felt exhaustion overtaking him and she was still a good distance ahead. “I was only teasing.”

Lydia, tired from running so hard, slowed down and Martin caught up with her. “I didn’t mean it. You can spell okay, for a learner.”

Lydia started to hit Martin but then they heard Bethleann in the distance calling them, “Martin! Lydia! Come here this instant!” They look at each other knowing they were both going to be in big trouble.

“Maybe we should go back to being Topsy and Hop,” Lydia suggested.

“What?” asked Martin.

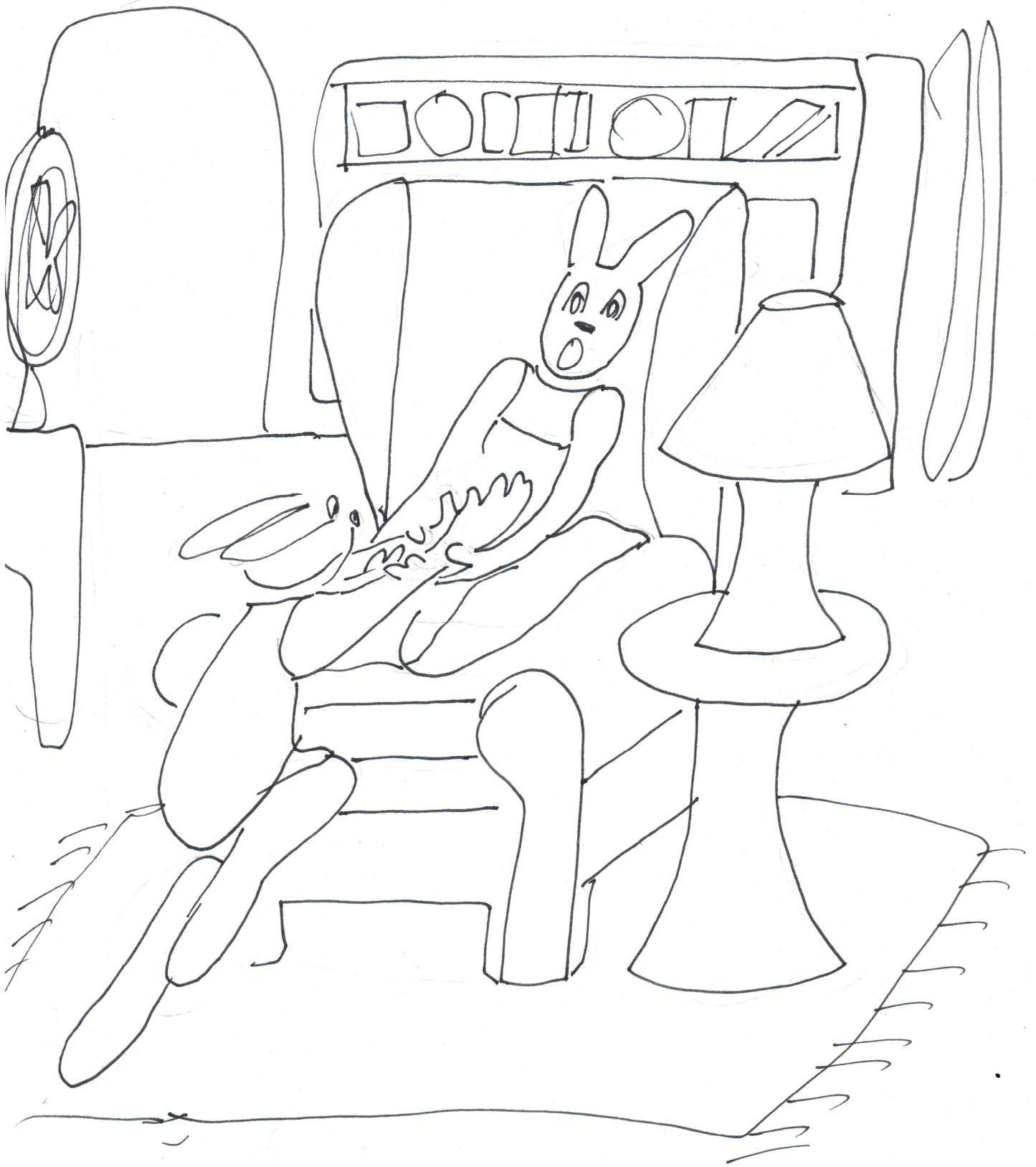
“Go back to being Topsy and Hop.”

“That would mean Martin and Lydia cannot actually hear Bethleann,” Martin said slowly, “since they aren’t here anymore.”

“Exactly,” agreed Lydia. “Come on, let’s go before she sends Benji after us.”

“Where?”

“I’ve got an idea. Follow me.”



Chapter 4

Here and There

“Lydia, I mean, Topsy, we can’t go in here.”

“Sure we can. And you can call me Lydia. I love my real name. We were just playing a trick on Bethleann.”

“Bethleann’s not going to buy our name change scheme for one minute.” Martin was less sure of the brilliant plan now that they had actually run away.

“We’ll worry about that later. Come on before they catch up with us. They need a chance to cool down or we’ll be on restriction forever.”

The bunnies were at Mr E’s shed. They tiptoed inside, calling for Mr E in quiet voices. “He doesn’t seem to be here,” said Martin. “Let’s go.”

“No. That’s the point. We don’t want him to be here. We’re going to try out this machine thing they are all talking about.”

“No! We can’t.” Martin shivered with alarm at such a thought.

“Sure we can. I heard Benji say how easy it was. You just sit in the chair,” she looked around. “It must be this chair right here,” she walked over to the arm chair that had sent Wellington and Benji on their time travel adventures.

“Lydia, wait. We don’t know what we’re doing,” moaned Martin. He wanted so badly to leave but his loyalty to Lydia kept him glued to the spot. They had been through many things together and he was not one to desert his best friend, even as scared as he was.

Lydia sat down in the chair. She looked around for a button or level to press or pull. She saw nothing. “Come on, Martin. Help me figure this out.”

Martin looked at the chair. “Maybe it has a remote control of some sort.”

“Yes! You are so smart. Look around while I keep searching the chair in case I missed something.”

Martin reluctantly scanned the room. He saw a funny looking wooden box on Mr E’s desk. “That looks promising.” He edged over to get a better look. The box had a lot of dials with numbers, lights, and knobs. He studied the box. It looked complicated. Very complicated. Too complicated for him. “It doesn’t look like its running,” he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Well turn it on. Hurry.”

“I don’t know, Lydia. We could get in a lot of trouble.”

“We’re already in a lot of trouble. We may as well make the punishment we’re going to get worth it,” she was digging between the cushion and the chair. “There’s nothing here. It’s just an ordinary chair.” She stood up. “Let me see that machine.”

“No, no, let me handle it,” Martin knew if Lydia got her hands on the machine anything could happen. He needed to do something quick. “Stay put. I remember Benji talking about falling asleep in a big cozy chair. It’s the only one like that in this room. That’s the right chair. Just let me think for a moment.”

Lydia sat back down.

Martin couldn't decide what to do. If he didn't do anything, Lydia would take over. If he fiddled with the machine too much, who knew what would happen? He really had no clue as to what to do. He reached out a hand and then pulled it back. He reached out again.

Just then, they heard noises outside. They both froze. "Mr E," Martin mouthed.

"Shh," Lydia put her finger to her lips. She crept out of the chair, and beckoned for Martin to follow her.

"Where?" he pantomimed with open hands and a questioning look.

Lydia pointed to the heavy curtains that hung at the front window. They were open but there was just enough room for the two to hide behind the folds.

Mr E entered the shed and headed straight for the kitchen area. Uncle Wells had originally built the shed behind Wellington's humble cottage to resemble a gardening shed. It was actually a home for Georg. They did not want to alarm the warren rabbits with the thought of a huge bear living in their midst and so the plan was for Georg to use invisibility to hide himself and to live in the shed. Wellington's cottage was too small for two so that living arrangement was out. And besides, both Wellington and Georg cherished their privacy as much as their friendship.

Over time, Georg had been introduced gradually to the community and so now, invisibility was not needed. After he and Bethleann got married last spring, they moved into Uncle Wells' much larger house, at Wellington's insistence. Now the shed served as a home for Mr E and was the perfect place for him to work on the time machine he was developing for Wellington to try and tweak the history of Black Veil toward the good side.

Lydia squirmed; it was getting hot behind the heavy drape. "How much longer is he going to be here," she sighed.

"Quiet." Martin pinched her.

"Just you wait," she looked at Martin with tears in her eyes. "I'm so thirsty," she went on in a small wilted whisper.

Mr E walked into the tiny living room. He walked over to his desk. He looked at the wooden box. "So much work left to do," he shook his head. "And Wellington keeps pushing me to get it perfect. He doesn't understand the delicate nature of time travel."

"What's he saying?" asked Lydia. "I can't hear."

"Me either," whispered Martin. "Probably nothing important."

And then, just when they thought he was not going to leave, Mr E headed for the door and left. They heard a key turn in the lock. "The door wasn't locked before," pondered Martin, still hiding behind the drapes in case Mr E forgot something.

"It is now." Lydia tumbled from behind the drapes, sweat dripping off her brow. "I've got to have a drink of water."

"Be quick about it."

Lydia scurried to the kitchen and pumped a nice cool draw of water. Then she headed for the chair and sat down. She looked at Martin standing in front of the wooden box studying the many dials and knobs. "Oh for goodness sake," she stormed out of the chair, marched over to the desk, reached over the top of the wooden box, twisted the biggest knob she could see, flounced back to the chair and plopped down. "There. Now come here."

Martin looked at her, his mouth agape. “What did you just do? Do you even know what you just did?”

“No, but you weren’t doing anything and Mr E could come back any minute.” The chair began to shimmer and slightly vibrate. Lydia’s eyes got big. She had actually done something. “Martin, come here quick! I’m scared.”

Martin skirted around the desk and headed for the chair. “Lydia!” Just as he reached the chair, it began to shine brighter. Anchoring her feet under the back part of the cushion and arching forward on her knees, Lydia reached out, grabbed Martin’s wrists, and pulled hard. She was strong. Martin would never tease her again about shortcomings. He landed in her lap just before everything went black.



Chapter 5

Oops

“Where are we?” asked Martin, shaking his head as he looked around. He was sitting on the ground next to a pedestal. Lydia was sitting next to him. They seemed to be in some sort of park, but it was a park like none he had ever seen. It had strange looking flowers and trees everywhere. It was pretty in an eerie way. But it was also very quiet. He could not hear any normal animal sounds, like birds chirping or bees buzzing about. There were no butterflies flitting from flower to flower. The pedestal they were sitting next to had a bluish glow to it but as Martin stared the glow began to fade and the pedestal looked like all the others he could see in the park.

“When are we is what I’m wondering,” said a very nervous Lydia. “I don’t like the feel of this place.” She reached for a flower and one touch confirmed that it was not real at all. “Fake flowers, that’s just not right.”

“Maybe they cannot grow real ones.”

Lydia thought about that. “Could we maybe be in the future? I thought the time machine only went backwards. I thought Wellington wanted to go back in time to fix Black Veil when he was a baby bunny. At least that’s what I think I heard. You know Wellington and Mr E are so secretive about the whole project. If only they would tell us more. Maybe we could help out.”

“We could,” agreed Martin. “You’re right, this sure looks like the future.”

They looked around, not wishing to move far from the spot they had landed. “Wonder how long before we go back?” Lydia was done with the adventure. She leaned up against the pedestal.

“Well, if you had let me study the machine a bit longer, I might have been able to figure some things out.”

“You were never going to do anything. Admit it.” Lydia gave Martin a hard look.

“I was getting to it,” he stalled.

“You were not!” Lydia stood up, her fists clinched.

“I was too!” Martin stood up and put his nose practically in Lydia’s face.

“Not!”

“Yes, I WAS!” Their voices were getting louder and louder.

“Hey there, you two! What are you doing in here? Don’t you know the garden is closed?” A guard or some sort of park warden was approaching them waving a Billy club.

“Run,” said Martin, and started sprinting down a pathway away from the direction of the guard.

Lydia did not need to be told twice. She took off after Martin, not daring to look back. Martin was running at top speed. She could barely keep up. “Martin, stop. I can’t breathe.”

Martin slowed and looked over his shoulder. The guard was nowhere in sight. He stopped running. “How will we ever get back?” sobbed Lydia. She was tired and scared. She regretted ever suggesting this adventure. “What was I thinking?” she started to cry.

“Stop crying, Lydia. We’ll go back as soon as that guard leaves.” Martin’s words were braver than he felt. He was certain they were going to be stuck here forever. A tear rolled down his cheek.

“Why are you over here?” a pretty bunny scooted between the two distressed bunnies, grabbing each by the arm. “Don’t you know the park is off limits until they find that missing rabbit?” She babbled on as she ushered Martin and Lydia out of the park.

“Why would they close an entire park?” Martin couldn’t help but ask as he felt himself being pulled along.

“Oh, Black Evil is on a rampage to find some famous rabbit. Reports are that he was last seen in the park,” she said as she guided them into an amusement land nearby. They had never seen such a place. The brightly lit rides were huge and, unlike the deserted park, there were young bunnies running about everywhere.

“Oh my,” said Lydia, her eyes getting bigger and bigger when no matter which way she turned she saw yet another massive roller coaster with unbelievable twists and turns and loops and drops and spirals. And all appeared to be floating without tracks. There were other odd looking rides too, but the coasters were definitely the main feature of the park.

“Oh my,” said Martin thinking about how dizzy those coasters would make him.

“Can we ride just one?” begged Lydia.

“We don’t have any money,” said Martin very relieved.

“You don’t need money here,” said the helpful bunny. “It’s all free.”

“Free?” That intrigued Martin.

“Yes, food, rides, games...all free. Have fun. I’ve got to go meet my friends.” And she disappeared into the crowd just like that.

Martin and Lydia did not even have time to say good-bye. They looked at each other. They looked around. They could see that no matter where they were, or even when, they blended in well enough. The park was packed with young bunnies yelling, whooping and having barrels of fun. They momentarily forgot about their trials.

“Let’s get some food, anyway,” said Lydia, realizing that talking Martin into riding a coaster was going to be impossible, “before we go back. Who knows how long we’ll be here?”

“Okay,” Martin agreed to that logic. “Let’s get something there,” he pointed to a hot dog stand close by.

“Sure,” said Lydia. “He must be starving,” she muttered under her breath knowing that Martin did not like hot dogs all that much. “Maybe he’ll agree to a ride after he eats something.” And she was really hungry. Almost hangry. A hot dog would taste great.

They walked up to the stand. “Two hot dogs please,” said Martin to the vendor. “And two sodas.” He loved soda and he hardly ever got a chance to have any. Bethleann was very strict about their diet.

The vendor put two hot dogs into two buns and put those into paper boats. He filled two paper cups with soda from the fountain. He put everything into a flat box and handed it to Martin “Dogs are \$5. Each. And the drinks are \$3. Each.”

“What? I thought everything here was free.”

“Whoever told you that was mistaken.”

“Martin, the banana stand,” Lydia whispered in his ear. She wanted that hot dog. She was so hungry she could eat it in one gulp.

“What?” questioned Martin.

Lydia took the box out of Martin’s hands and gave it to the vendor. “Don’t do anything with our food. We’ll be right back.” She grabbed Martin’s hand and pulled him away from the astonished vendor. “Follow me.”

Lydia led him over to an empty banana stand. She opened the door. “Lydia, you can’t just go in there.”

Lydia ignored him. “Quick,” she said, “help me get onto your shoulders.” She hopped up on the counter.

“Wha...”

“No questions. Hurry.” Martin held Lydia legs while she balanced on his shoulders. She reached up. She could just touch the colorful towels that were pinned to the ceiling. “Stretch onto your toes, Martin. But don’t drop me.” Martin stretched at high as he could. Good thing he was a hopscotch champ like Benji. His leg muscles were well developed and his balance perfect. Lydia put her hand inside one of the towels and pulled out a fistful of bills. “Bingo!” She jumped down off Martin’s shoulders.

He was astonished. “How did you figure that out?”

“Everyone knows there’s money is in the banana stand,” she grinned. “Let’s go eat.”



Chapter 6 Hopabout

Mr E had so much on his mind. He was very proud of the performance of the time travel machine. But he knew there was more work to be done. Look how close they had come to losing Wellington to that future Black Veil. Mr E shuddered at the thought. Wellington was supposed to go back in time and instead he had gone forward!

“I need to figure out what went awry,” mused Mr E. He was taking a long walk. It always helped his brain to think clearer when he walked.

“Of course!” he suddenly shouted out loud. “I’ll go on a hopabout. That will clear my brain. Why didn’t I think of that sooner?” He rushed home, dug out his sack and filled it with supplies from the kitchen. He took a good look around to see that everything was tidy. He started to turn the machine off but he saw no harm in letting it run in idle mode. He stepped outside the cottage, closed the door, locked it and set off humming as he went.

He had not gone far down the road before Mr E kicked up his heels and rubbed his hind legs together. They were in fine tune. Accompanied by the tune his legs put forth he sang:

“A cricket’s life for me
No other can it be
A cricket’s life
Has no strife
Hoppy Doodle Dee”

Then he launched into a second, third and fourth song. He kept playing and singing until he was far from the warren, as happy as could be. Finally he began to wind down. “Boy, that felt good!”

“And sounded good too.”

“Say wha...who’s there?” called out Mr E. He was on a quiet road, no travelers in sight.

“Tis only I, Lance, a woe begotten leprechaun,” said a little man all dressed in green, stepping from behind a tree. “Sought by all, overlooked by most, destined to pass my days wandering far and wide for fear someone may catch me and steal all my money of which I do not have any.”

“But I thought all leprechauns had gold beyond counting.”

“Alas, everyone thinks all leprechauns are rich. A curse started years ago by a disgruntled dwarf. Dwarves do have wealth beyond imagining. But now, thanks to that myth, 'tis we leprechauns that are sought after for the gold. No one looks for dwarves. Where are you going?” the leprechaun suddenly asked.

“I’m on a hopabout.”

“Can I come along?”

Mr E thought about this. He would not get any thinking done with this leprechaun along. Still he did not want to be rude. “Why?”

Before Lance answered a voice rose over the hill behind him, “I think he came this way.”

“Help,” the leprechaun pleaded with Mr E. “They mustn't find me.”

Mr E hesitated.

“I'll pay you.”

“I thought you didn't have any gold.”

“Maybe a little.”

“Lance, where are you? I know you're around here somewhere. Come on. It'll be fun,” the voices were getting closer.

“Please,” the word tasted wrong in Lance's mouth. He did detest begging, but he was desperate.

“Very well.” Mr E just knew he was making a bad decision. “Slip into my sack.” He opened the sack and Lance ducked inside and buried down under the food. Mr E marveled at how small the leprechaun made himself. He secured the sack and adjusted it back on his shoulder just as two creatures came over the rise.

“Hey there,” they called. “Have you seen a leprechaun anywhere around here?”

“A leprechaun you say?” Mr E looked puzzled. “How could I see a leprechaun? Everyone knows that they hide better than a pot of gold.” He laughed at his joke. “Hope you find who you're looking for,” he waved and hurried on down the road before the creatures could question him more.

He traveled on for some distance and then stopped and put the pack down. He opened it up, “Okay, it's safe. You can come out now and be on your way.”

Lance slowly crawled out of the sack, “Thanks, I guess.”

“You're welcome, I guess.”

“It's just that those two will be after me until they find me,” Lance tried to look distraught. He was not good at this needy stuff. He could take care of himself.

“Who are they? What do they want?” As much as he wanted to get on with his solitary hopabout, Mr E could not help but be inquisitive.

“Oh, they're sort of friends of mine.”

“Friends? You're running away from friends?”

“They are trying to get me to do an acting job. They've set up an interview and everything. I know I can't refuse them, but I really don't want to do it. Too many people, too much disguise needed and the pay's not that good.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Well, Cullen, he's the rounder one, got a job in a moving picture. He landed the role of stunt double and long shots for the town drunk, which isn't much of a stretch for him seeing as he's a perpetual drunk anyway being a clurichaun. They're quite known for their capacity to consume spirits, you know.”

“No, I don't know, but go on,” Mr E was very anxious to get on with his hopabout. He was beginning to regret ever stopping to help the leprechaun.

“Then there's Goeffrey. He got the same kind of job stepping in for a Mr. Gold on long shots and action scenes in some kind of television thing. Not much of a stretch for him either.”

“Why so?” Mr E was also beginning to be very annoyed with his insatiable curiosity.

“Goeffrey is a far darrig and they will stop at no lengths to create havoc. Mr. Gold is the

perfect role for him.”

“And so why does this concern you?”

“They think it’s a lark. They want me to join them. They want me to be in some grim show. But all the creatures get killed off in every script. It would hardly be worth my time, and like I said, I don’t want to do it.”

“So just tell them.”

“You don’t just tell those two anything. Next, they’ll have me auditioning for those vampire movies. I can’t do it. I won’t do it.” Lance was becoming more and more unnerved. “I’ll never have any peace. My life is ruined.”

“Now, now it can’t be all that bad.” Mr E could see his hopabout was close to being ruined.

“It’s worse than bad. Two of them against one of me. Please,” again the word barely escaped Lance’s throat. He could not believe he was groveling like this but desperate times called for desperate means. “I’ll do anything.”

“Hey, there he is with that cricket fellow. I knew he was tricking us. Lance! Lance! It’s all set. Your interview is today.” Cullen and Goeffrey were bounding down the lane toward Mr E and Lance.

Mr E made a hasty decision. “I’m really going to regret this, but here, hop back into my sack.” Lance was in the sack in a flash. Mr E secured it well and began hopping toward Cullen and Goeffrey. They were delighted. The cricket was making their task of corralling their friend easy. But when Mr E got to them, he took one flying leap and was over and gone before they could blink, much less protest.

Lance was peeking through the top of the sack. He stuck out his tongue as he and Mr E sailed high over his two buddies. “Bye, losers,” he called out.



Chapter 7

Time's A Wasting

Mr E took Lance back to his shed. When they were inside and the door secure, Mr E opened the sack wide and Lance jumped out. "Nice place," he nodded approvingly. "I could get used to this crib."

"Not so fast," Mr E put his arms on his hips and gave Lance a stern look. "It is impossible for you to stay here, and from what you say about your buddies, they'll find you anyway, sooner or later. So now what?"

"I didn't mean to stay forever. Just until I figure things out."

"No," said Mr E very firmly. He was not giving an inch.

Lance dropped his shoulders, "Okay, if that's how you feel about it. And after all I've done for you."

"Done for me? What have you possibly done for me?" Mr E was flabbergasted at the gall of this feisty leprechaun. He could not be gone soon enough.

"Promised you anything, that's what." Lance poked his finger in Mr E's face. "And I keep my promises, you'll see. But now I need shelter. Far from here. Do you know any magic? Strong magic?"

"No. And if I did, I would not use it for your selfish needs. Magic is for serious events." He was not about to tell Lance that Georg was a highly accomplished magician. Bethleann and Wellington could do magic well enough, too, but Georg was clearly the champion.

Lance pouted, "Then I'll go find my real friend Lewis the Legendary. He'll help me."

"How do you know Lewis?" This disturbed Mr E. Lewis had made it extremely clear that he wanted nothing more to do with being a wizard and surely this leprechaun meant to put that to the test.

"He's my best friend. He's a real friend. Not like those two losers we left in the dust," Lance shuffled his feet on the carpet. Mr E had not yet invited him to sit down. "Do you know him too?"

It was apparent to Mr E that Lance did not know that Lewis had a bakery nearby. "I've heard of him," he skirted the question. He could not let Lance find Lewis. He must protect the wizard at all costs.

Lance paced the room. "There has to be something we can do."

Mr E did not care much for the 'we' in that sentence. Just this morning he was free on a wonderful hopabout and now look. He had more problems instead of fewer.

"What's this?" Lance approached the machine.

"Leave that alone!" Mr E could feel panic in his voice.

"Why? Is it some kind of magic machine? You told me you did not have any magic?" Lance studied the dials and knobs. "It certainly looks like magic."

"Get away from there!" Mr E was shrieking. "Don't touch a thing. Do. Not. Touch. A. Thing." He spoke in a low firm voice. "Please."

Lance stopped. There was that word again. He paused. Please was to be respected no matter the source. "Why?"

"That is a very sensitive machine. It is not magic. Not exactly." Mr E spoke slowly and deliberately. "Here, I will show you. Go sit in the chair over there." Mr E indicated the arm chair.

"I know it's a time machine," Lance said heading toward the chair. As he passed Mr E he aimed a kick at his shin. But Mr E saw it coming and shifted out of range.

"Don't try to kick me, you little rogue," Mr E was miffed. "What makes you think this is a time machine?"

"Do you really think that I let you see me without a plan? I knew you would bring me here. And I know you have a time machine."

"Who told you?" Mr E was alarmed.

"No one told me, you ninny. I overheard those two silly bunnies talking about it." Lance twisted about in the chair, trying to get comfortable. He was not used to sitting for any length of time.

"You must mean Topsy and Hop," said Mr E. "They went on a boundabout recently."

"I didn't catch their names. I just heard them talking about the machine and how you would not let anyone near it. I came to find you but then I saw you leave and decided to follow you. It all worked out better than I expected. Cullen and Geoffrey played their roles to perfection."

"You mean they were in on it all along?" Mr E realized that he had been had.

"We wee creatures stick together." Lance continued to wiggle about in the chair.

"So why are you really interested in my time machine?" drilled Mr E.

"Because I'm going to get gold from other times and bring it here. I'll be the richest leprechaun of all."

"What makes you think I will help you?" asked an astounded Mr E.

"Because I am going to help you and then you are going to help me," Lance said in a flippant manner. He was getting very tired of sitting in the chair, but he dared not move. He wanted to be ready at a moment's notice. He did not want to give Mr E any motive to change his mind.

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Simple," Lance studied his fingernails. "I could use a good manicure," he said, holding up a hand to examine it. "I have some information you need."

"Go on," Mr E's patience was wearing thinner and thinner.

"I know where those kids went. Well not exactly where, but how. You know where." Lance could not help but give a smug grin.

"What kids?"

"Those two bunnies that were talking about that machine." Lance simply had to get out of the chair. He stood up in the middle of the cushion. That helped. He stretched each leg.

"Explain yourself," Mr E was about to pull his antenna out, he was so frustrated. "Please."

That word again! It was almost magical. "Okay, okay, calm down. They came here nosing around. I was hanging out in the bushes waiting for you and saw them. When they saw that you were not home, they went inside. I slipped over to the window and peeked in."

Mr E could not believe what he was hearing. "Continue."

Lance jumped up and down on the cushion, then sat down. "They were arguing. The girl one wanted to do something with the machine. The boy one did not. Then you came home and they hid behind the curtains. After you left, the girl one did something with the machine and ran to the chair. It was glowing. The boy started to get mad, but the girl was scared. At the very last second, she grabbed the boy and they both disappeared."

"Oh my," said Mr E sitting down. "What has happened?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"Not really, but let me think," he sat down on a stool. "You have not fiddled with anything, nor have I, so the machine may give us some clues." Mr E got up and walked over to the machine. "The settings are the same as the ones I used for Wellington. Topsy must have initiated the engage sequence and sent them there. How long ago was that?"

"Exactly 8:55. I looked at your clock."

"Alright, I dare not meddle with the machine for fear of losing them. I will risk sending you there to find them and bring them back."

"Send me on a mission?" Lance did not like this turn of events.

"They know nothing of portals or time frames. You will have to explain those things to them. Their portal will open at 8:55. Yours will open twelve hours from now, that gives you two opportunities to locate them and get them home. Be mindful the portal only stays open for a short duration. Do you have a time piece?"

"But..." Lance started to protest.

"No buts. When you succeed, we will talk about your adventure plans." Mr E gave Lance a stern look. "Now do you have a time piece?"

Lance dangled a pocket watch for Mr E to see.

"Coordinate times," Mr E commanded. "12:05," he said, looking at his mantle clock. Check your watch,"

Lance gave his watch a cursory look. "What if I cannot find them?"

"You want to go gold hunting? Find them!"

What if I fail?"

Mr E turned the knob starting the engage sequence. "Failure is not an option."



Chapter 8 A Problem

“So much for being mature and responsible,” Bethleann sighed as she watched the two bunnies disappear in the distance.

“Let them go,” suggested Georg. “They’ll cool down soon enough and be home looking for dinner. They are probably exhausted from their boundabout. As relaxing as those outings are, they can tire you out too,” remembering his own roamabout days.

“I suppose you are right, as usual,” Bethleann smiled at her handsome husband. “I need to change Sebastian. How about Edward?” She was referring to the tiny bear cub Georg held in his arms. He was not their birth bear but a cub Benji had found when he took a trip in Mr E’s time machine. Benji had landed in the middle of the raging fire and found the little scared bear huddling in the shrubbery. Benji’s trip was a trial and designed to only last a few minutes, so he instantly decided to bring the baby back with him rather than leave him to such a bleak destiny. Mr E was pretty worried that Benji had messed up the timeline, but Benji just couldn’t leave him in the fire. After much deliberation with Wellington, they decided that the bear’s family was probably scattered far and wide at best and so he got to stay in Willis Warren. Edward had just been born to Bethleann and Georg and so the two babies could be raised together.

The day began to wane and still no bunnies appeared. “Benji, would you and Zach go on a search and see if you can find them? This has gone on long enough,” Georg directed.

“Sure,” said the brothers.

“I’ll go to town,” offered Benji.

“And I’ll scour the fields,” said Zach. “The signal corps taught me a lot about field surveillance.”

“You can signal me if you find anything,” suggested Benji. “I’ll climb the clock tower from time to time to look for your signal.”

“How about on the half hour? I’ll signal even if I’ve found nothing. Both ears straight down for nothing. One ear straight up for success. Signaling is a lot more complicated than that, but this will do for now. I’ll teach you all about it later if you like.”

“I would like that a lot!” Benji hugged his brother and rushed off to town while Zach headed down the lane toward the countryside. Benji looked all over town and asked everyone he saw but no one had seen the two bunnies. He even stopped at the bunny ward and asked Headmaster Athelstan if the kids had stopped by for a visit, but no luck anywhere. Benji climbed the clock tower at the half hour and saw the top of Zach’s head with both ears drooping down. “So disappointing,” he sighed.

He checked all the favorite hangouts once more, climbed the clock tower again to only see the top of Zach’s head with both ears down and reluctantly started for home. “Maybe someone at the Doggone has seen them,” he felt inspired. The tea shop was on the edge of town and it had slipped his mind. He hurried toward it. “Master Culper, Miss Hilarey, Chef Lewis,” he called out upon entering the aromatic smelling establishment.

“Is that you, Benji?” Hilarey stepped out of the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron.

“Yes, I’m looking for Martin and Lydia formerly known as Hop and Topsy. They’ve taken their original names back and disappeared all in the same day. Have you seen them today?”

“I have not.” she said as put down a tray of warm cookies. “Help yourself. Better yet, take a sack home for after dinner.” Benji gobbled up three cookies in a flash. “Want me to ask the guys if they’ve seen the kids?”

“Wouff you plese,” sputtered Benji, his mouth full of cookie.

Hilarey smiled, “Hey guys,” she called out pushing through the kitchen swinging door. Benji couldn’t hear the replies but when Hilarey came back shaking her head he knew the answer. “But Chef Lewis said they’d keep a lookout.” Benji took the sack Hilarey had loaded with warm cookies. “Didn’t hold out much change that they had come your way but worth a shot and thanks for the treats!”

Zach was already back at Wells Way. “That was unproductive,” he sighed. “Now what?”

“Did anyone think to ask Wellington or Mr E?” asked Georg. Everyone thought someone else had done so.

“Let’s all go check,” said Bethleann. “We can pack our dinner and eat on the patio between the cottage and the shed. I’ll bet the kids are there playing some sort of board game with Wellington.” The dinner was quickly packed and the troupe tripped lightly across the meadow.

“You mean the kids are missing and no one told me?” Wellington was a little angry.

“We all thought someone else had talked to you, Wellington,” Georg assured him. “Do you think Mr E might know something?”

“He’s been holed up in the shed all afternoon. I didn’t dare interrupt him. He’s been so testy lately trying to get the machine working exactly like he wants.”

“Well, let’s go see if he knows anything.” Wellington and Georg headed for the little shed while Bethleann and the boys set up dinner and tended the babies.

Georg rapped on Mr E’s door. “Mr E, are you awake?”

Mr E slowly opened the top to his Dutch door. “Hello, Georg. Wellington. What’s up?”

“Have you seen Martin and Lydia, known to you as Hop and Topsy, today? They’re missing and we’re worried.”

“See them?” he asked. “Now that’s an interesting question.”

Wellington was puzzled at Mr E’s strange reply, “Do you know something of their whereabouts then?” he asked. Mr E kept silent. “E, what do you know?” Mr E looked from Georg to Wellington and back again. He could not let them worry on about the kids; he had to let them know what he knew.

“I may know something. Come in,” he opened the door.

“What are you saying, E?” asked Wellington.

Mr E decided to get it all over with at once. “It seems that the kids got curious about our machine and took a little trip.”

“They what!?”

“Relax. I’ve got someone on the job of getting them back. In fact, any moment now they should be showing up.”

Bethleann and the boys appeared in the doorway. “Did I hear you say that you know

something about our lost children, Mr E?"

Mr E wrung his hands. "Please, everyone sit down. Not in the arm chair. Anywhere else, anywhere at all."

Just then the chair began to shimmer. "See I told you they'd be arriving soon," Mr E beamed. But nothing appeared in the chair. The shimmer began to fade. "I guess he didn't find them quite yet," said a letdown Mr E.

"Who?" asked Wellington.

"Lance the leprechaun," said Mr E. "He's very good at tracking." Mr E made that part up because it sounded good. Maybe he and the leprechaun had more in common than he thought.

"Did you say Lance?" asked Lewis and Hilarey, walking in with a basket full of fresh cheese straws. "Thought maybe you all could use these."

"How did you...." started Wellington. "Oh, never mind," remembering that Lewis may have hung up his hat but he was still a wizard and always would be.

Everyone could see that Lewis and Hilarey made a great couple. Maybe there would be another wedding soon. Maybe wizard Lewis had another reason for throwing his hat into the Doggone Tea Room and Inn ring besides being tired of wizarding full time. The delicious cheese straws were quickly devoured with gusto. Supper had been completely ignored and they were starving. Lewis and Hilarey got a pitcher of water and mugs from the kitchen. Benji retrieved the sack of cookies from the patio and passed it around. It was a weird dinner but then it was a weird night.

"You really trust Lance to do a job for you, Mr E?" asked Lewis.

"He said he would do it." Mr E looked worried.

"Good luck with that," laughed Lewis. "He says a lot of things. Well, we have to get back to the bakery, orders to fill. Hope things work out with that leprechaun."

"He'll be here with the kids when the next portal opens. You'll see," Mr E said positively.

"How long before that?" asked Georg.

Mr E did not need to look at the clock, "About three hours from now."

"I really want to stay but I need to get the babies to bed," yawned Bethleann, "and me."

"I'll come with you," said Georg. "Benji and Zach, you stay here and be helpful." Georg and Bethleann wrapped the sleepy babies up well and took off across the meadow. Benji and Zach set about packing away the uneaten dinner and tidying up the mugs and crumbs. Then they sat down with Wellington and Mr E to wait.

"Your ears are so long," said Benji admiringly. "Even longer than when we were kips. I wish mine were that long."

"Really?" asked Zach. "They can be so bothersome when they get droopy. I'm always tripping on them." He stood up to show Benji what he meant. As he bent over, stepping on an ear to demonstrate, his knee suddenly gave way under him causing Zach to fly backwards right into the machine. It went crashing to the floor.

"Oh no!" yelled Mr E, his eyes wide.

Zach began to cry, "What have I done? Did I break it for good?"

Wellington gathered the distraught bunny in his arms. "Mr E can fix anything."

Mr E looked more than alarmed. "Maybe not this time. Maybe not in time."



Chapter 9

A Trick or Two

Lance looked around. He was in some sort of park. He hopped down off the pedestal he was sitting on and dashed into a bunch of flowers growing close by. Or at least he thought they were growing, but as he scooted between the leaves, he felt scratch marks. “These plants must not be real,” he muttered. He noticed a tear in his lovely green jacket. “Guess I best be careful, or my clothes will be in shreds.”

No sooner had he scrunched down gingerly between a group of tall daffodil type flowers than a large rabbit came along with another walking beside him. “Too big for those kids,” grouched Lance. “Finding them fast would have been so sweet,” he sighed.

“Sure is slow tonight,” the first rabbit said.

“It’s slow every night on this beat, Bert, since they shut down the park,” said the other one.

“At least Red Satin is not on patrol with us, eh Ernie,” Bert gave his buddy a friendly shove. They had stopped a few feet from Lance’s flower patch.

“Yeah, he’s gotten so full of himself now that he is king’s counsel.” Ernie turned around and then quickly back again. “Did you just see that?”

“I liked him better when he was court jester. See what?” asked Bert.

“Looked like a flash of green cloth over there by those flowers. Might be a leprechaun.”

“You’re kidding, right? What have you been drinking? You know there are no leprechauns around here.”

“I know that everyone says there are no leprechauns around here. But that might be to keep us from looking. I mean, 5,000 silver whiskers, dead or alive, is no small change.”

“Yeah, I could use that. I’d buy me a hover-yacht. You really think you saw a leprechaun?”

“Sure looked like the right color green,” he headed toward the flowers. Lance told himself not to panic. Dead or alive? And all for silver? Were they daft? Now if it were gold...but still, dead or alive, got him into some fast thinking. He got a spool of thread out of his shoe kit and tossed it across the way into some shrubs.

“Over there!” said Ernie excitedly. They both ran toward the place where the spool had landed. Lance took no time in heading through the flower patches and bushed as fast as he could away from the two guards. Soon he was at what appeared to be the edge of the park. There was an iron fence with a big gate up ahead. Just then, a rabbit in a red suit came walking saucily through the gate.

“Must be that Red guy they were talking about.” Lance had another instant plan. He prided himself at being able to think on his feet. “Must be my cobbling experience,” he chuckled to himself, “thinking on my feet.” Just as the rabbit walked by the spot where Lance was hiding, Lance jumped onto his back and began pummeling him with his shoe hammer. The rabbit went down in a flash. Lance dragged him into the bushes and proceeded to strip the rabbit of his beautiful red satin suit, after which he tied him up good with some spare shoe laces he carried in

his kit. Next he fashioned some ears out of his tattered green jacket using scissors and thread from his kit. He attached them to the hat the rabbit had been wearing and put it on. "If I stay in the shadows this disguise should work," he said, putting on the rest of the suit. If Lance had been a mean leprechaun, he would have lopped off the rabbits own ears and used them, but he was not mean, just mischievous.

"There, that ought to do it," he checked the knots on the shoe laces. He used the remainder of his jacket to make a gag and secure it well so that the rabbit could not call out. "Someone will find him but by then I will be long gone." He patted his hands together and stood up. He stepped out of the shrubs and looked around. He did not see the guards. "Now to find those kids."

"Hey Red," Ernie called out to Lance. "Did you come to relieve me?" It was those guards. Where had they come from?

"Naw, he came to relieve me!" said Bert, giving Ernie a shove.

They walked up to Lance. "Red, you're looking a little green around the ears. New job not agreeing with you?" asked Ernie. Lance kicked him. "Ouch," complained Ernie. "Okay, I get it," he held up his hands as Lance started to kick him again. "Don't hurt me. You had too much to drink last night, that's all."

Lance laughed and tried to speak in a gruff voice, "You're a barrel of laughs," he said punching Ernie in the belly.

"What's up with your voice?" asked Bert. "You really did go on a binge last night, didn't you? Why are you here if you're not relieving either of us?"

Lance indicated a direction over his shoulder with his thumb.

"Oh, so Black Evil wants to see us," figured Ernie. "Maybe he's got questions about those kids we found earlier."

Lance's ears perked up. His actual ears, not his fake ones. Those were already beginning to annoy him. "Let's go," he said in his best gruff voice. "You first," he shoved Bert forward.

"Okay, okay, just because you had a bad night doesn't mean you have to be so nasty to us, your bosom buddies," Bert slapped Lance on the back. Lance growled back at him.

"I'm going, I'm going," said Bert, swinging his Billy club in a circle.

The three walked toward the gate and through. Lance could see an amusement park up ahead. "Maybe the kids are there," he mused to himself. No sooner were the words out of his mouth when a burly rabbit holding two bunnies by the scruffs of their necks walked out of the amusement park and headed in the direction of Lance and the guards.

"Going to Black Evil?" he called out.

"We were," said Ernie. "But from the looks of things, you caught what our business was about. Black Evil won't need us now," he sounded relieved.

"Yeah," said Bert. "Red can take them in. "What'd they do?"

"Stole money from the banana stand," said the burly guard. "Woulda gotten away with it except for Busy.

Martin and Lydia wiggled, trying to get loose from the burly rabbit's grasp. "She said she was our friend," said Lydia, hurt that the friendly bunny had turned out to be a fake.

“Fooled you,” laughed the burly guard. “She’s my best thief catcher. Busy will set you up so it’s impossible not to steal, just like she set you two up. Then we split the reward,” he gave Lance a hard stare. “You look mighty puny. Sure you can handle these two?”

Lance growled at the burly guard and snatched the two bunnies from him before he could react. He held them as high off the ground as he could and began swinging them around by their ears.

“Ouch,” cried Martin.

“Stop,” cried Lydia. “You’re hurting me.”

“Good,” grinned Lance swinging them harder. “Thieves get no mercy.”

The burly guard was impressed. “Alright, you’ll do. Just be sure you credit me with the catch. If I find out you didn’t it’ll be curtains for you. Got it?”

Lance just kept swinging the two bunnies and then switched to doing crossovers between each swing. Martin began throwing up every bite of his hot dog. “Got it,” Lance said as he set off down the street still swinging the two rabbits.

The three guards watched for a short moment and then went back to their jobs, relieved that they did not have to face Black Evil. When they all were out of sight, Lance put Lydia and Martin down. “Sorry about that, but I had to put on a convincing show.”

Martin lay flat on the ground. “Who are you?”

“Lance the leprechaun at your service. Mr E sent me here to rescue you.”

Martin felt instantly better. “Rescue us?”

“Hooray!” shouted Lydia

“Not so loud. We’re not in the clear yet,” said Lance. “We have to go back into that park and get to the pedestal before the portal opens.” He looked at his watch. “We’ve got ten minutes. Let’s go!”



Chapter 10

A Promise

Bummy and Clyde were bummed out. They had searched everywhere they could think of for the missing rabbit. They decided to check in with Bert and Ernie to see if their top guard team had turned up anything.

“Black Evil’s going to have us for rabbit stew if we don’t come up with something soon,” said Clyde, shaking his head. “Beats me how that rabbit just disappeared into thin air.”

“Like he never was here to begin with,” added Bummy. “Maybe it was all a dream sequence.”

“Try telling that fantasy to Black Evil and see how far it gets you.”

“Right into the stew pot, after you. We’re in this together. Come on, we’ve got to think harder.”

“Thinking is hard for me. Cut me some slack.” Clyde was a horse of a rabbit. He was more brawn than brain. They were at the entrance to the park.

“What’s that glow over there?” Bummy pointed to a small shimmer of pulsating light inside the park. It was unlike the rest of the park lighting that was low and ambient. “Maybe Bert and Ernie did find something.” They entered the park on tiptoe. They did not want to upset anything that might be happening. Then they saw their buddies near the glow. They seemed to be arguing.

“We gotta get closer so we can hear,” said Bummy. He and Clyde inched forward.

They could hear snatches of a debate going on between Bert and Ernie.

“What is that?” asked Ernie.

“Some kind of alien force?” said Bert.

“Or maybe a spying device of Black Evil’s?”

“Why would it shimmer if it was a spying device?” They saw Bert cuff Ernie. “That’s a stupid idea.”

“What is it then?” The shimmer was beginning to fade.

“Maybe some light trick,” said Bert. “We better not say anything. They’ll all think we’ve lost our marbles.”

“Good point,” said Ernie. “Swear on your pinkie.”

“Okay,” said Bert offering his pinkie. Ernie linked his and they both swore not to mention the strange light on the pedestal again. “Probably just a reflection,” Bert was already reasoning away the thought of aliens and spy robots.

“What’s up guys,” Bummy stepped out of the shadows with Clyde right behind him.

“Oh, nothing,” stammered Ernie.

“Quiet night,” said Bert as off-handed as he could.

“We saw a light,” said Clyde, getting right to the point. “A strange light.”

“Did you guys see it?” asked Bummy.

“Not me,” said Ernie. “How about you, Bert?”

“Nope.”

“Now isn’t that odd,” said Bummy. “I could have sworn we saw you two standing next to that funny light.”

“Want to change your story?” asked Clyde, taking hold of Ernie’s arm.

“I think Black Evil needs to hear about this,” said Bummy. “You two know more than you’re saying.”

“But guys, we didn’t see no rabbit,” said Bert coming clean, “just that funny light.” Ernie glared at him. “They seen us and the light,” Bert protested to Ernie.

“That’s right,” said Bummy, “and now we’re all going to have a little chat with Black Evil about what we saw and what we didn’t see.”

“Yeah,” said Clyde, “maybe you saw the rabbit too. And pinkie swore not to tell anyone about that either.”

“Now why would we do that?” sighed Ernie. “Black Evil will do anything to get that rabbit back. You’re as good as set for life if you turn that one in.”

“I don’t know why but we’re all going to see Black Evil and discuss things.” Bummy was tired of this conversation going around in circles. “Let’s go.”

Lance and the bunnies had witnessed all of this in complete horror and fascination at the same time. They had been prepared to jump onto the pedestal holding tight to each other so as not to slip and then as Lance began the countdown to their jump from the shrubs, Bert and Ernie had appeared and thwarted their chances of riding the portal home.

“Now what?” whispered Lydia from the bushes as they saw their chance to go home dashed.

“We have one more portal opening in about three hours,” said Lance, looking at his watch. “We need to lay low until then.” The three hours passed so slowly. Lance kept looking at his watch. He was not good at this responsibility thing. The kids were quiet. Lydia lost count of now many times she wished she had never thought of this adventure. Martin was glad he had eaten only one hot dog. He still felt sick from all the ear swinging.

“Finally,” said Lance finally. “It’s time. Now grab hands and we leap on my mark. One, two, three!” They leapt, landing perfectly in the middle of the pedestal. Nothing happened. Lance had wanted to be on the pedestal when the portal opened. “Maybe we need to get off and then it will open,” he said. Since the coast was clear they hopped down beside the pedestal and waited. Nothing happened. They waited and waited until they felt uncomfortable being out in the open for so long. They scramble for the bushes.

“Now what?” cried Lydia.

“Apparently something went wrong at the other end,” said Lance. “We’ll wait awhile longer.” They waited and waited.

“Those guards will be coming back.” Martin was scared. “Or different ones. We need to do something.”

“I’m thinking,” said Lance. He struggled with himself. He had a plan but it was not without peril. Peril to himself. Still, Martin and Lydia were just kids. They needed to be home with their family. He opened his cobbler’s kit and began cutting and stitching.

“Why are you sewing something now?” asked Lydia incredulously.

“You’ll see,” was all that Lance would say. At last, he was finished. He held up two tiny pairs of shoes with even tinier gold wings on them. “Here, put these on.” He handed each bunny a pair and began putting away his tools.

“They are so beautiful,” oohed Lydia.

“They’re too tight,” moaned Martin.

“You don’t need to wear them for long,” said Lance.

“Now when I tell you, stand up, hold hands, and tap your heels together three times saying the magic Dorothy words, “There’s no place like home.”

Lydia just looked at Lance. “Where are your shoes?”

“Don’t worry about me. Just hold tight to each other and have faith.”

“But what about you?” asked Martin. “We can’t leave you here.”

“I only had enough leather for two small pairs of shoes. I will be fine. I am a very resourceful leprechaun. And if that dastardly Mr E gets his machine working again, he can send someone to pick me up.”

The bunnies looked at Lance. They did not want to leave him here.

“I’ve got lots of time to find all the gold in this land. I’ll be rich beyond compare. Now be off with you before those guards come back.”

Martin and Lydia held hands and began tapping their heels together.

“Remember to tell Mr E that Lance kept his promise. Don’t forget now. I may be a rascal and a leprechaun known for mischief, but I keep my promises!”

Epilogue

Everyone at the breakfast table was astounded when Lydia and Martin walked in the back door grinning from ear to ear and holding up two pairs of beautiful hand tooled shoes with wings on them, saying, “These brought us home,” said Lydia.

“We’ll never be bad again,” said Martin.

“We’ll never fight again,” added Lydia.

“We love you all so much,” sniffed Lydia.

“And we’re so sorry we caused you worry,” finished Martin. “Ground us forever.”

“Give us all the chores to do,” said Lydia.

“There, there,” said a moved Georg. “Everybody makes a mistake once in a while. You’ve learned your lesson.”

“But how on earth did you get back?” asked Benji. “Mr E is still working on fixing the machine.”

“That I accidentally knocked over,” offered Zach.

The bunnies told how Lance had found them and their trials over getting home and how Lance had made the magic shoes, sacrificing his own safety for theirs.

“Do I smell thyme-roasted chicken?” Martin said, his mouth watering. “My favorite!”

“For dinner,” smiled Bethleann. “We had confidence we would see you all soon.”

“We need to tell Mr E something right now,” begged Lydia.

“I think that is a wise idea,” said Bethleann. She reasoned that they wanted to tell Mr E how Lance had done such a noble thing. “Go quickly and then get back home for some breakfast while everything is still warm.”

Martin and Lydia smiled. It was so good to be home.