

WELLINGTON RABBIT

RHYS'S PIECES



Written and Illustrated by

Sandra Leigh Jett Ball

For grandson Rhyson Jett Ball
His bright eyes and broad smile capture your heart

Titles set in Harrington Bold
Text set in Goudy Old Style

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Foreword

Because a loving and gifted mother wanted to do something special for her children at Easter, Wellington and his friends came into existence. Other books for children have been created for similar reasons and have lived on to become classics and masterpieces, enriching the literature of the world. *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wind in the Willows* especially come to mind. This little book is ageless and has the same kind of magic.

Miriam Haynie
Reedville, Virginia

Preface

The story of Wellington Rabbit began as an Easter project for our five children. I decided to make a stuffed rabbit, complete with clothes and accessories, as a gift for each of them. Thus Wellington, his magical cape and haversack, with its never-ending supply of colored eggs was born. As an explanation, I wrote a short note telling the origin of Wellington's name and of his talents. One paragraph became a page, and then two, and soon there was a book in progress. But, as good things sometimes do, it got left by the wayside and did not get picked up again until the following Easter.

That Easter I made everyone an Uncle Wells rabbit for their collection, but no one had yet seen the book or knew much at all about the story, myself included. Now you may find my lack of knowledge strange, but remember, even though my name appears on the title page, everyone knows that Wellington is the real author.

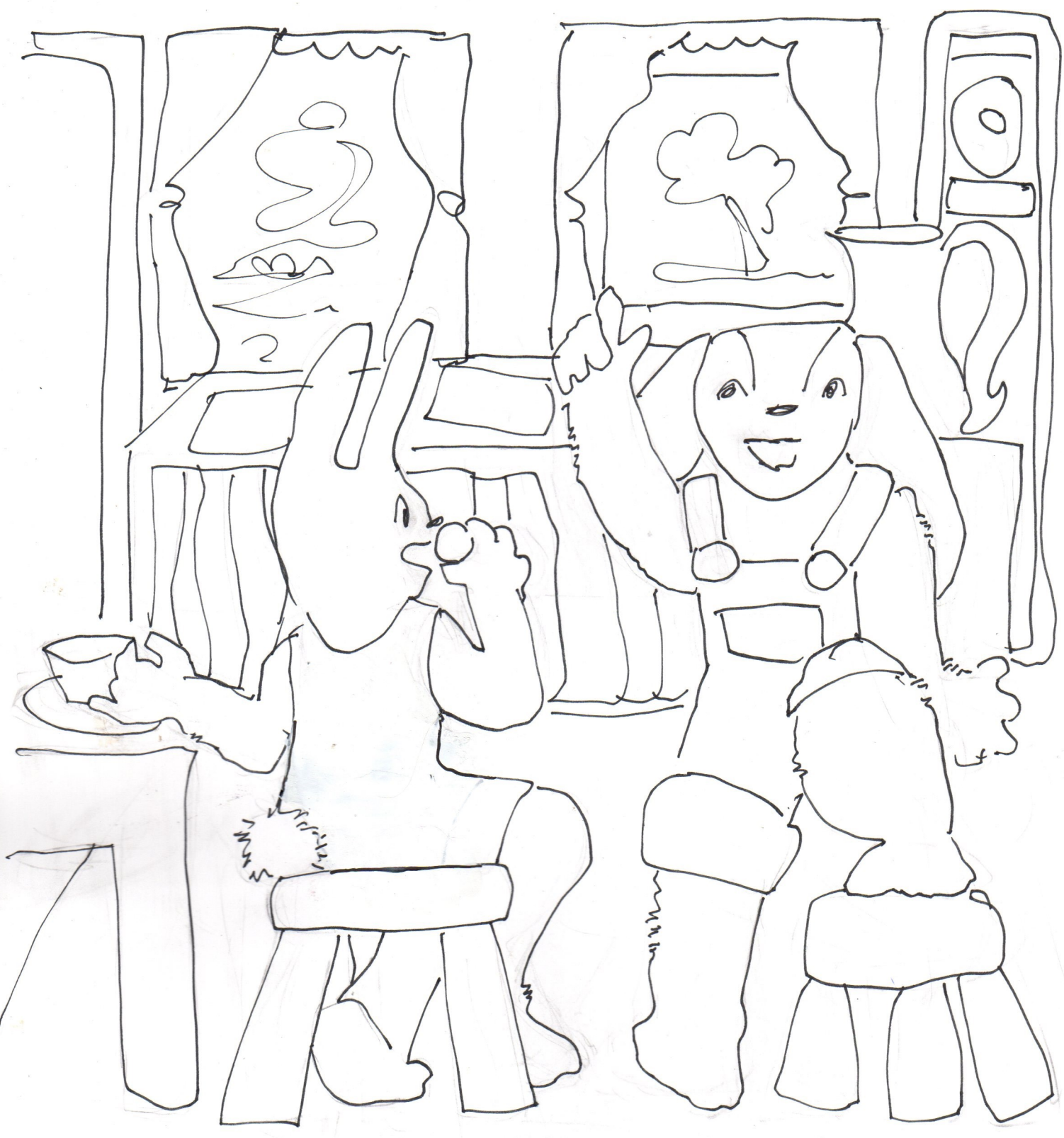
Another Easter came with Georg, the bear with magical powers, arriving on the scene. By now we were all getting anxious to know the whole story. It was time to finish the book. I worked on it now and again all that following year, and in a great blitz of creative energy finished in time to sew together small books for each Easter basket. There were even photos of Wellington, Uncle Wells and Georg.

Everyone loved the story, but being somewhat greedy, they all wanted more—illustrations, they begged. The reason I had not done any drawings was because I needed just the right setting for Wellington, and nothing seemed to fit. Then one day we were visiting my cousin, Miriam Haynie, a published author herself, and it dawned on me that her house was the missing piece. It was perfect for Wellington and Uncle Wells. She had an incredible collection of gifts and treasures accumulated through a lifetime of being creative and loved by family and friends. When I told her my idea she laughed and said her house did have a sort of rabbitish feel to it.

Each illustration has 'Easter eggs' of its own. Family mementos, from Wellington's Oshkosh overalls that all the kids wore to Donny's favorite chair he brought from home when we married. Wellington sits in it as he learns his destiny.

Every book needs a good editor, and this is where my soul mate and creative partner Donny shines. He sorted that first book into chapters and created a format for the books that followed. He polishes far into the night and then lets me have all the limelight. He is my kindred spirit and love of my life.

Once the first book became a reality, I understood that more were needed to finish the tale, thirteen in all. Family members and friends became characters and as the grandchildren came along, they became members of the team. After the final book was written another grand joined our family and I realized there was more to the story. Because, truth be told, a good story never really ends but continues from thread to thread. And in case you are wondering, Wellington gets his name from the gardening boots any sensible rabbit wears unless your name is Peter and you find yourself face-planting into one.



Chapter 1

A Message

“This is not going well.” Wellington was in his study at his typewriter trying to recapture the thrilling adventure the team had just been on that once and for all fixed Dark Veil, turned Dark Evil, turned Dark Vile. It took massive effort and several attempts, but that rabbit was finally and forever changed. “Guess tweaking him into Be Like Calvin worked because he’s all about using his given name, Black Live, for good now. And it matters to me to get the story right,” he mused.

“Maybe if I take a break.” He stood up, shook his fur, and headed to the kitchen to freshen his tea. “A bagel ball is what I need.” Wellington dug around in the bread box, coming up with a nice cinnamon sugar one. Bagel balls were Wellington’s creation. Just the right size for a quick snack.

“Have you got any more of those?”

Wellington looked toward the screen door where the voice was coming from. “Zach, is that you? Come in, come in. I do believe I spied another bagel ball in my larder.”

“I am so hungry. PJ ate all of our snacks while Ben and I were discussing a message. He didn’t mean to do it. They just sort of slipped into his mouth.”

Wellington had managed to locate the last lonely bagel ball, warmed it on the stove a skosh and put it on a plate for Zach. He slid the butter dish close and poured a spot of tea. “Now what brings you here in such a famished state?”

“Mmmeesaggee frrroomm FLX.”

Wellington shook his head, not getting a word of what Zach was trying to say. “Slow down, lad. Finish your bite, take a sip of tea, and then tell me.”

Zach had no problem savoring the tasty bagel ball. Wellington was a master chef. It really was a very yummy bagel and he was so hungry. “Ah.” Finally he took a swig of tea. “FeliX,” he started.

“FeliX!” exclaimed Wellington. He sorely missed his new llama friend. “You have news? Do tell,” he urged.

“FeliX,” Zach started again.

“Whatever is that rascal up to now? I know him. It’s something gone awry.” Wellington pressed his paws on the table. “Go on.”

“I’m trying,” Zach sighed.

“He’s such a magnet for weird trouble.”

“FeliX,” Zach started for the third time.

Wellington crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Yes, I’m waiting. You’re taking rather long to get this message out.”

Zach started to protest but quickly realized that would only drag things out even more. He decided to change his approach. “Ben.”

“Ben, what’s Ben got to do with FeliX?”

Zach just stared at Wellington, who could be so exasperating sometimes. “While he was on signal duty Ben got a message to you from FeliX.” Wellington started to interrupt but Zach rushed on. “It made no sense to Ben and he asked me if I thought he had read the signals wrong.” Zach held up his paw to indicate that he was not finished before Wellington could interrupt.

But Wellington was not to be denied. “Well, did he?” As good as Ben was at his job, Wellington knew Zach was the better of the two signal corps rabbits, partly because Zach had been at the job longer, but also because he was really good at deciphering.

“Oddly, it was very short. At first I thought Ben surely had misinterpreted it.”

Wellington waited, fresh out of questions and comments.

“Ben showed me the log and I could find no way the message could be anything other than what it is.”

“Which is?” Wellington was quick to recharge his quizzing abilities.

“It said one thing.”

“One thing?”

“Actually one word.”

“One word?”

Zach nodded and took a sip of tea.

“That doesn’t sound like FeliX.”

“That is exactly what Ben thought and why he began second guessing himself. Ben never makes a mistake. He is more thorough than I, but he was completely baffled.”

“Are you going to tell me the message, even if it’s just one word?”

“I thought you’d have figured it out by now.”

Wellington was mystified. “What have you offered that could possibly give me a clue?”

“FeliX.”

“And.”

“One word.”

“You’re teasing me.”

“I might be.”

“But you indicated that it was urgent. You practically choked on your bagel ball.”

Zach laughed. “Did I say that? Or did you assume a message from FeliX would probably be urgent? Considering, like you say, that he’s a magnet for mischief.”

Wellington huffed up. “Just give me the message.”

“Guess it.”

“Guess it? Are you playing with me now?” Wellington knew Zach loved a practical joke.

“Maybe.”

Wellington was in a spot. He was known to be very clever. But as yet he had no idea what FeliX might be sending him a one-word message about. Still, he did not want to ruin his reputation as a sharp thinker.

“Stumped?”

“No,” he said, but, in fact, Wellington was desperate.

“Where did FeliX send the message from?”

“That’s asking for a hint.”

“It is not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Okay, fine, forget that I asked that.”

“I can give you a small hint,” he grinned. “I won’t tell Ben. Or FeliX.”

“No, no hints. I’ll get it, just give me a moment.”

Wellington went over what he knew. Message. Maybe urgent. But not that urgent or even joker Zach would be more serious. From FeliX to him by way of the signal corp. Nothing odd about that. FeliX could have sent a Telebee. More direct. But maybe the bees were otherwise occupied.

“Ready for the answer?”

Wellington was deep in thought and shook off Zach with a paw wave. That could mean Poppy Leigh’s fields. Poppy Leigh is another new friend who helped the team redirect that black rabbit’s focus. She had an immensely popular business selling poppers she made from her special pink poppies. She created the strain herself and was quite proud of her achievement. Her poppers left customers perfectly satisfied and nothing else; no crazy cravings for more and more.

“Give up yet?” Zach was quite enjoying the balance of his bagel ball.

“NO!” If Poppy Leigh were involved that meant the river or a side stream might be a clue. The river had taken on a strange ability and had begun jumping all around before it could be persuaded to stay within its banks.

“I’m waiting,” Zach peered into Wellington’s eyes. “You don’t have any idea, do you?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Wellington stalled. What was he overlooking? Right, one word. Wellington grinned. “I’ve got it!”

“You do?”

“Oh, yeah, very easy when you put it all together.”

“So, let’s have it.”

“Are you going to admit that I’m right?”

“If you get it right, yes.”

“Puddles.”

“That’s it!” Zach was impressed. “How ever did you figure that out? You ARE good.”

Wellington beamed, relieved to have gotten the answer right. “FeliX could have sent a Telebee but the bees were too busy in Poppy Leigh’s fields. That meant he was near the river, which caused quite a commotion with all of its jumping. When you put FeliX and water together, more times than not you get...”

“Puddles!” exclaimed Zach. “Very smart of you, Wellington!”

“Thank you, kind sir.” Wellington took just a moment to rest on his laurels. Then he stood up. “C’mon, not a moment to lose. We’ve got work to do!”



Chapter 2

Detour

“Where are we going?” Zach tried to keep up with Wellington, who was tearing about his cottage at breakneck speed, gathering this and that as he went.

“FeliX has found a new mission and needs our help.”

“You got all of that from one word?”

“FeliX can be a llama of few words.” Wellington stuffed the items he had gathered into his haversack. He pulled on his cape which had moments before been quietly sunning on a hook by the front door. With a sparkle in his eyes he turned to Zach. “Lead on.”

Zach paused, not sure that he wanted to be leading this wild goose chase. “Where to first?”

“Why, to Ben and PJ, of course.”

Zach slapped his head with his paw. “Of course. Another message might have come in. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” Wellington winked. “I’ve got many more strange missions under my belt than you. It gets easier with each one to piece together the pieces.”

He latched the front door. As they slipped out the back door, he pushed the leather latch lifter through a tiny hole in the door. “Wouldn’t it be easy for anyone to just come on in while you’re gone?”

Wellington looked at Zach. “To get in you need a hook to pull the leather strap back through the hole and lift it to release the latch. If anyone does all of that they must really need to get in. I won’t mind.”

“Has it ever happened?”

“Nope. Most folks don’t use such a convoluted process so it’s pretty foolproof.”

“I see,” but actually, Zach had his doubts.

“Before we head out, I need to stop these bagel balls off at Bethelann and Georg’s.”

“I thought you gave me the last bagel ball.”

“I did. This is a special batch I made for Edward. Some comfort food for his first roam about.”

“Where is he going?”

“Don’t you know?” Wellington quizzed Zach, who lived in the same house as the young bear.

“No. Ben, PJ and I have been on a camp out. What’s up?”

“For a bit he talked about trying to find the woods where he was when Ben rescued him.”

“What? Wait. I thought Ben rescued Sebastian.”

“Don’t believe everything you read in those earlier books.”

Zach looked puzzled. Ben never talked much about his time travel trip and since it was before Zach came to Willis Warren, the details were sketchy. Zach opened his mouth to say as much but changed his mind. Being whiny never solved anything. “Did Mr E fix the time travel machine?” He recalled how he tripped over his ears and broke the machine at a critical point.

“Mr E is extremely close-mouthed about that machine.” Wellington thought about all the almost fights he and Mr E had about time travel in general and the machine in particular. “But he’s away at an inventor’s convention conducting a special seminar on his creation.” Wellington was proud of his friend and the hard work it took to bring his design to fruition.

“Oh, I hope he has fixed it and is singing its praises!” Zach clung to his vision of being exonerated.

“We’ll know when he’s ready to talk about it.”

They approached the house where Zach lived with his brothers and a gaggle of other lively children. It was big and perfect for a large family. It used to belong to Uncle Wells, Wellington’s beloved uncle who, after teaching Wellington and new friend Georg all the details about being the Easter Bunny, faded to that mysterious world of the WEB.

A wonderful house it was, but just too much for Wellington. He gladly passed it on to Georg and Bethleann as a wedding present and settled back into his tiny bungalow.

Currently there were nine children who called this special place home. Sebastian, who belonged to Georg and Bethleann; Edward, rescued bear; Martin and Lydia, brother and sister bunnies; Marie Kelly and Clara Leigh, mirror sisters; and Ben, Zach and PJ, tall-eared rabbits.

“Anybody home?” The meadow travelers had reached the back door.

“Wellington, is that you?”

Wellington whirled around to see a pretty-faced girl leaning back on her stool where she had, moments before, been busily weeding the kitchen garden. “You’re a sight for sore eyes!”

“In the fur.” Wellington fussed at himself for not visiting more often. Time just had a way of slipping by so quickly.

Bethleann looked Zach over. He seemed fit and fine for being in the outdoors going on over a week. “How is the camping trip?”

“Great! It’s nice to be able to roll out of bed and be at work. Of course, good weather helps. I certainly wouldn’t want to give up the comforts of this house for very long. I’m here now to deliver a message that we got for Wellington. Ben thought that it might be urgent.” He cast a furtive look to see how Wellington would react to the urgent part.

Wellington threw up his paws. “He rushes in and tries to tell me about this message that Ben received, all the while downing a bagel ball bite. It was impossible to understand a word of what he was saying.”

“Not true. I knew exactly what I was saying.”

“Then he makes me guess the message like some sort of game.”

“You two.” Bethleann knew how fond the rabbits were of each other. “Teasing is your bellwether to a great adventure.”

“Bellwether.” Wellington groused.

“Teasing?” Zach was wide-eyed.

“Did you two come here for me to sort it out?” Bethleann stood akimbo, shaking her head at the two.

“No. We brought a batch of bagel balls for Edward to take on his roam about.”

Bethleann knew how much Edward loved bagel balls, especially with cream cheese. “How sweet. He’ll be delighted.”

“Bethleann! Bethleann!” A voice rolled through the house, starting at the front door which had been flung open, and ending at the back door that had also been flung wide, almost taking it off its hinges. The voice was followed by a very black small bear in a huge rush.

“Edward, whatever has gotten into you?”

“Slow down before you bowl yourself into next year.” Zach was rarely at a loss for clever phrases.

“Zach? I thought you were camping.”

“I am, just needed to deliver a note to Wellington.”

“Wellington!” Edward gave the senior rabbit a bear hug. “Did you bring me some bagel balls?”

“Edward!” Bethleann raised her voice in a you are displaying bad manners admonishment.

“I’m famished. Please say that you did.” Edward pushed the words out right on top of Bethleann’s scolding.

“That is no way to greet anyone, sir.”

“Sorry, Wellington.” Edward had to dig deep for a bit of contriteness, but it was sincere.

“As a matter of fact, that is exactly why Zach and I are here, Edward. I heard you were going on your first roam and thought a bag of bagel balls would be handy to take along.”

“I’ll say! Thank you. Thank you!”

Bethleann was relieved. All her manners teaching was not wasted after all. “Now, what brings you home in such a rush?”

“I was checking my gear on a short walkabout, like you suggested, and saw a sign in town.”

“Go on.”

“There’s a place called the Hundred Aker Wood. They are looking for a bear named Edward to fill in for their resident bear while he is on vacation. He’s better known as Winnie-the-Pooh and don’t ask me how they got that from Edward,” he paused for a quick breath, “but I’ll find out when I apply!”

Everyone started talking at the same time.

“Where is the Hundred Aker Wood?”

“Is that the forest that adjoins Wealdway Ramblin Path?”

“How can a bear be named Edward but called Winnie-the-Pooh?”

Edward slammed his paws over his ears and yelled. “Stop! I’ll answer your questions. I cannot think with everyone talking together so please talk just one at a time. But first, I need those bagel balls.”



Chapter 3

Hundred Aker Wood

“Eat, lad, then talk.” Wellington handed the bag of bagel balls to Edward. “Some of each of your favorites; plain, sesame seed, and cinnamon. Oh, and there's a wee pot of cream cheese with a spreader in the bottom of the bag.” He winked at Bethleann in case she might think he thought her pantry inadequate, and added, “I prepared this to-go bag in case Edward was ready to be off when we got here.”

“Ah, that is very like you and so thoughtful, Wellington.” She turned to Edward. “I have another question. Why does this Hundred Aker Wood need a fill-in bear? Can't the creatures go on vacation without such fanfare?”

“Yeah,” chimed in Zach. “Seems kinda weird to me.”

“I do not know,” admitted Edward, polishing off one bagel ball after another at a remarkable pace. “The flyer didn't go into those details. Just where and when. And do not bother to apply if you are not a small black bear with the given name of Edward.”

“That rather limits things, I'd say.” Wellington was turning all of this information over in his mind.

“These bagels hit the spot,” yawned Edward. “I think I might need to take a nap.”

“Aren't you worried that another Edward bear might snag the gig?” asked Zach.

“We can go with you,” added Wellington.

“You'd do that?”

“Of course.”

“Especially since we're going that way anyway,” volunteered Zach.

“How do you know that?” Wellington turned his attention to Zach.

“Aren't we?”

“Actually, we are, but how could you know that I decided not to check for a new message?”

“I didn't, but I know you. I only said that we were going the same way and could tag along to give Edward a confidence boost. I want him to win.”

“Now Edward knows your scheme.”

“But he also knows that I want him to win. So, win win.”

Wellington gave up. “Everyone ready to roam?”

“Right now?”

“Would you like a sandwich first?” The nurturing attribute in Bethleann was strong.

“Thanks, Bethleann, but I have plenty of food in my haversack. We had best get this bear to his destination. Don't fret, Edward, you'll get the knack of it and become a veteran at roamabouts in no time.” Wellington gave Bethleann a good-bye hug. “Try not to miss the little tyke too much. He's quite ready.”

“You're feeling chipper.”

“You, of all, should know that there's nothing like a good solid adventure to put the spring in my step and, by Jove, we have not one, but two!”

Bethleann smiled, recalling how she had met Wellington and Georg. She was coming to visit Uncle Wells only to find that he had faded to the WEB. In his place was a green behind the ears newly title Easter Bunny, Wellington, and his sidekick, Georg. Without skipping a beat Bethleann jumped right in to help the two out with a big adventure that had literally formed before their eyes. The three bonded immediately. When Georg and Bethleann decided to get married, Wellington was elated. His two favorites together forever.

“The Wealdway Path starts not too far beyond Gertie’s.”

Wellington’s words brought Bethleann out of her memory jaunt. “But you don’t know if that is the way to go or not.”

“True, but it’s popular with the Ramblers and if we’re on the wrong path one of them should be able to direct us to the Hundred Aker Wood.”

“Be off then. And be careful!”

“We will,” all three called over their shoulders, feeling comforted with Bethleann’s traditional send-off floating on the air.

It was a balmy day and the three trekked along in silence, each in his own thoughts. “I’ve never been this far,” Edward stopped walking. “Maybe I don’t want to go on a roam about.”

“How about the job?” Zach stopped too and peered into his eyes.

“Maybe I don’t want the job. Maybe they won’t want me.”

“You’re perfect!” declared Zach.

“How would you know? Have you met this Winne-the-Pooh Edward?”

“Maybe.”

Wellington turned around. “If you two are going to spat at each other, keep walking while you do it.”

“But I’ve changed my mind.”

“No, you haven’t. You’re just out of your comfort zone.”

Zach grinned. “Wellington is a natural at pressing on when he’s out of his comfort zone. Trust him.”

Edward started walking slowly. “It feels weird.”

“That’s what being out of your comfort zone is like.” Zach spoke with authority.

“Have you ever been out of your comfort zone?”

“Not as many times as Wellington, but enough to know what I’m talking about.”

Edward did trust his friends. “Okay.” He shuffled a few steps. “I guess.”

“Beat you to that rock.” Zach took off.

Edward did like a challenge. He started sprinting. Zach had a good head start. Then he tripped on a rock and Edward zoomed past him, reaching the end first. “You tripped on purpose.”

“I don’t think so.” Zach puffed up to the goal. “Look at that scratch on my knee. Not even for a good friend like you would I throw a race, especially if it meant wounding myself too.”

“Well done, Zach!” Wellington knew it had been a ploy to get Edward over his misery. He was certain Edward knew too. But he was also certain that Zach did not let Edward win. There were limits to how far an incentive need go.

Soon they came to a fork in the path. “Why a fork? Why not a knife? Or a spoon?”

“Zach, this is no time to be funny.” Edward was close to tears. Being out of his comfort zone for such a long time was tiring.

“Well, if I were you, I’d go that way. But then this way is also nice.” The travelers saw a scarecrow gesturing with both arms in a very contorted manner.

“No, no, no, we are not going to go down this road again.” Wellington stomped his foot.

“You’re right, that scarecrow is off his hay wagon. Go this way.” A cat sat in a tree, grinning a wide grin and at that instant also began to fade before any of them could see which way it was pointing.

“I will not be tricked into believing either of those creatures!” Wellington was furious.

“What’s wrong, Wellington?” Zach was curious why Wellington would be so distrustful, just like that.

“That scarecrow can hardly find his way down a yellow brick road. And that cat. That cat. Well, let’s just say I’ve had dealings with both of them before and it was nothing but trouble.”

“Can I help you?” A pleasant looking hiker approached the cross paths.

“We are looking for the Hundred Aker Wood,” said Edward, feeling slightly more comfortable seeing Wellington’s discomfort.

“You’re headed to the audition, are you not?” The hiker eyed Edward up and down. “You ought to do well.”

“Audition? What audition?”



Chapter 4

The Audition

“Why, the audition for Edward Bear. Isn’t that why you are looking for the Hundred Aker Wood?”

“Yes,” said Edward slowly. “But I did not know about anything called an audition. What’s that?”

“It’s where you try out for a role,” explained Zach. He had auditioned once but he found it was more out of his comfort zone than he expected. He did get a call back although he turned it down.

“A role? Edward Bear is a role?”

“Yes, and it’s the most important role. Every year the actual Edward Bear takes a vacation, and someone fills in for him so the tourists are not disappointed.”

“Fills in for him?” Edward was so confused.

“Do you not know the story of Winnie-the-Pooh and his friends?”

“I guess not.”

“The Wealdway Ramblin Path weaves beside the Hundred Aker Wood and hikers love to watch their favorite bear and his friends act out their very famous stories.”

“Oh, my.” Edward was astounded. “I shall never be able to do this audition thing.”

“Why not?” asked Zach. “You like to play act.”

“We’ve come this far,” added Wellington. “May as well see it through. You might surprise yourself.”

“The entrance is not far along the main road, no fork needed. Good luck!”

The team picked up the pace to a brisk walk and sure enough they soon came upon a huge archway with the words Hundred Aker Wood dancing across the top.

“Why are those letters dancing?” asked Edward, for the letters were actually dancing in place.

“They look happy,” observed Wellington.

“They dance because it’s a happy place,” a small black bear rushed by them and disappeared inside.

“We’re here!” Three more black bears practically knocked Wellington over in their excitement to have arrived.

“My goodness, this place must be extremely popular.”

With Wellington leading the way, they went in the direction the other bears had gone.

As they cleared a small stand of trees, surprises were in every direction, starting with directly ahead. There stood a serious looking owl, clipboard in hand. “Well, well, well, what have we here?” He was referring to Zach and Wellington. He had already shooed Edward towards a group of bears gathering nearby.

“We’re with him,” said Zach, pointing to Edward. “Support team.”

“Oh, I thought perhaps you wanted to audition for the role of Rabbit. But neither of you are the type at all.” He scanned them both from head to toe. “Nope. Ears too floppy, body too full.” This to Wellington. “Your body is passable, but those ears are much too tall.” Zach straightened himself up, drew in his breath and opened his mouth.

But before he could utter a word, “Who’s Rabbit?” Wellington asked.

“Who’s Rabbit? He’s only one of the lead characters in the Hundred Aker Wood production.” Owl looked down his glasses at Wellington for asking such an inane question.

“Ohhh,” Wellington stomped on Zach’s toe for good measure. He did not want anything ruining Edward’s chances. “I could never be good enough for Rabbit, but our friend is the perfect Edward Bear.”

“He and about fifty others.”

“How many?”

“It’s always the most popular role to fill,” Owl sighed. “If you’re not auditioning you can go sit on those benches over there. Your friend will join you when he’s done.” He moved on to the next applicants.

“Wellington, you should go find FeliX. He might really need a helping hand.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Will you be okay here?”

“As long as they don’t try to make me audition for Rabbit. They might want to cut my ears.”

Wellington laughed at that thought. He left a hearty lunch for Zach and headed for the Wealdway Ramblin Path.

Zach was still full on the bagel ball and stuffed the lunch into his pouch. It was a small, short-term serviceable pouch because he had not intended to stay at Wellington’s any longer than it took to deliver the message. It bulged alarmingly but the zipper was strong and Zach was confident that it would hold.

Not one to sit around, Zach went looking for Edward. There were so many small black bears. “This might take a while.” He tried calling Edward and instantly realized the error of that plan when every bear started running in his direction. “Never mind,” he shouted. “Wrong name.”

He saw a long line of bears queued up for some sort of test. He moved closer. “Next!” A kangaroo summoned the bear at the start of the line. “Sit here.” A smaller kangaroo attached some wires to the bear’s ears. “Name?” the larger kangaroo asked.

“Edward,” said the bear smartly. “Ouch, that hurt.” The machine had pinched his ears.

“Exit is over there,” the head kangaroo pointed to a gate in a stone wall.

“Did I get the part?”

“Hardly, you don’t even get to continue the audition. Only bears truly named Edward move up. Can’t fool the machine. Next!”

Zach was astonished. Maybe Edward had a good chance after all. He quickly looked along the queue until he spotted Edward. He started to call out Edward and then remembered. Instead, he scooted up to his friend and whispered into his ear. “Don’t say a word but you’ll pass this part of the test easy,” and he explained why.

Edward's grim face turned to a grin. He had begun to worry that his chances were slim with so many applying for the part.

"Wellington went on to find FeliX, but I stayed here to cheer for you."

Edward was touched. "Thanks!" The line progressed quickly and soon Edward and thirty-three other test passing bears were all that were left. They looked at each other nervously.

"This way, please." This time a grumpy donkey beckoned them. "Sit over there." He pointed to a bench. The bears sat. Zach hovered close by. "You're early. Rabbit auditions are tomorrow."

"Oh, I'm not..." but the donkey had already turned his attention back to the bears.

"Who's first?"

A giggling girl bear stood up. "May as well get this over with."

"A girl?" questioned another finalist.

"Got a problem with a girl named Edward? I once knew a girl whose name was Michael and her sister's name was John." The curious bear shook his head.

"Quit wasting time," the donkey said in his gruffest voice. "Crawl through that hole." He indicated a round hole several feet off the ground in a tree trunk. She did as she was told.

"Next."

Then it was Edward's turn. He crawled halfway into the hole and stopped. "I'm stuck!"

"Try harder."

"I can't move. Forward or backward." He was in tears. Failed and he had not even finished the audition. He knew he should not have eaten so many bagel balls.

"Humph," the donkey kicked Edward who popped through the hole. "Next."

When the last bear had either crawled neatly through or gotten stuck like Edward, the donkey addressed the group. "If you got stuck, go find Tigger. The rest of you are excused. Better luck next year."



Chapter 5

A List

There were bears everywhere he looked as Wellington exited the woods. “I sure hope Edward gets the job.” He shook his head at so many that had thought the same thing about themselves.

He paused past the entrance. “Now which way should I go?” He looked left. He looked right. Nothing looked much different in either direction. He could go back to the fork but that did not feel like the thing to do. He decided that he would go right since it was uncharted territory on this adventure. He had heard good things about the Wealdway Ramblin Path but for some reason had never wandered along it. He knew that it was extremely popular with hiking clubs. Maybe that is the reason he avoided it. He loved meeting folks, but maybe even more than that, he loved his solitude.

“If I skip and stop then I’ll never hop to my next adventure,” he sang. It was a made-up song. He loved making up nonsense songs.

“What does that mean?” a small voice spoke.

Wellington stopped. “Like what I’m doing right now, stopping.”

“And you’ll never hop to your next adventure?”

“Exactly! You’re a clever one,” he looked closer at, well, he wasn’t sure what he was looking at. “Who are you? What are you?”

“My name is Rhys. I am a llama. Can’t you see?” He spread his arms wide.

“I have a very good llama friend, FeliX, and you do not look at all like him.”

“I should think that I do! After all, I am his brother.”

“You’re FeliX’s brother?” Wellington looked even closer. “I still don’t see llama. I see bear.”

“You do? Hooray! If I fooled you, I surely shall fool the bees.”

“Fool bees? That is a fool’s errand. Nothing fools bees.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

Rhys sighed. “Then I’m going to need help. Would you help me mister whoever you are?”

“Name’s Wellington. Help you with what?”

“I’m trying to get a job with the Hundred Aker Wood production department. The fox in charge sent me out to collect some pieces.”

“What sort of pieces?”

Rhys sighed. “I don’t know exactly. She told me to bring her the first piece first.”

“Which is?”

“A beehive.”

“Why are you dressed like a bear?”

“I thought bears liked honey.”

“True, but do bees like bears?”

“I dunno. I thought maybe they would be used to seeing bears around their hives.” Rhys reached for some kind of reasonable suggestion as to why he thought a bear disguise would be helpful.

“You might have something there. Familiarity and all of that.”

Rhys beamed. Maybe his idea was a good one after all. “But you said that nothing would fool a bee,” he remembered.

“That was a little bit of hyperbole.”

“Hyper...what? Hyper bee! I need to be a hyper bee!” He began to dance around. “I can do that.”

“Not hyperbee. Hi per-bo lee. It means exaggerated intent, not exaggerated action.”

Rhys felt dejected and hot after all that jumping around. “I haven’t even found one bee, much less a hive.” He plopped down on the ground.

“Now, now, that’s not the way to get the job done.” Wellington snapped his fingers. “I have a suggestion that might make it easier.”

“Set out a honey trap? I already tried that. I only got ants.”

“Nope!” Wellington pulled Rhys to his feet. “C’mon, you’re going about this the hard way.”

“I am?”

“Yes, instead of a working hive, let’s find an abandoned one.”

“What about bees?”

“My friend Poppy Leigh is friends with oodles of bees. She’ll find us just the right new colony.”

“How are we going to get the abandoned hive down if it’s high in a tree?” Rhys had already worried a lot over that scenario.

“Not all bees build in trees. Some build in bushes and even the ground. We’ll beat the bushes until we find one. Let’s head in the direction of the entrance to the Hundred Aker Wood. Then we won’t have so far to go when we do hit pay dirt.” Rhys had already started off in that direction, big stick in hoof. He had removed his bear costume and put it in his saddlebag.

Wellington followed, walking stick lifting and poking brush left and right.

They had not gone far when Rhys called out, “Hey, I think I’ve found one.”

“Let’s see.” Wellington rushed over to where Rhys was holding a branch back.

“Well?” asked Rhys.

“It’s a splendid specimen.”

“And it seems to be vacated.” The two worked to loosen the hive.

“All yours,” a lone bee flew out. “We’ve relocated to the poppy fields.” Wellington and Rhys just looked at each other and laughed.

“It’d be funny if they end up back in their old hive.” Wellington was thinking about what a good sales pitch Poppy Leigh could spin.

“Time will tell.” Rhys loaded the hive into his saddlebag, and they headed for the Hundred Aker Wood. When they reached the production office Wellington decided to wait outside while Rhys took care of business. He told Rhys that he was going to look around for Zach and Edward, explaining that Edward was vying for the part of Winnie-the-Pooh.

“I hope he wins. Then he will be using my prop pieces!”

“That he will!”

Rhys went into the office. It was always bustling with activity. He barely avoided tripping over a big pot labeled ‘Hunny’. “They really could use a good tidy up and sweep in here,” he mumbled. He approached the fox and held out the hive. “Will this work?”

“Looks good,” she was rather distracted.

Rhys did not want to appear too eager. “Foraging comes natural to me.”

“Works for me. See what you can do with the rest of this.” She handed Rhys a list, turned to attack another pile of To Do’s, and stopped. “How did you get that opposable thumb?”

“Oh, it’s not really opposable. My brother always had trouble making do without one and taught me a trick or two that he figured out after much trial and error.”

“Good idea, very resourceful.” Rhys was about to acknowledge the compliment, but the fox had already turned her entire attention to a huge pile.



Chapter 6

Two Arms

Edward was astounded. He thought for sure that he was going to be dismissed. “We were supposed to get stuck in that hole?” he asked another successful bear as they walked toward the spot where Tigger was waiting.

“Yes!” exclaimed the bear. “I’ve been gorging on food for weeks. You never know exactly what size the hole is going to be so it’s pretty tricky to get it right. You eat too much and even Eeyore cannot pop you through. That didn’t happen once this year, but it has in the past. You don’t eat enough and you’ve lost before you get started.”

Edward was amazed. This audition was far more complicated than he imagined. “What are we going to do next?”

“You’re going to try but lose because I’m going to win. I’ve been practicing and practicing.”

Edward did not like the sound of that plan one iota. “Excuse me?”

“You’ll see,” the bear marched on ahead.

“The nerve,” grumbled Edward. “I’ll show that bear.”

The girl named Edward came up behind. “Never mind him. He always says he’s going to win just to scare off the competition.”

“I thought you lost already.”

“I did, but I like to watch the rest of the audition and pick up pointers in case I ever get this far.”

“Can you give me any?”

“Hmmm,” she looked Edward up and down. “You seem like a caring sort of bear.”

“Oh, I am.”

“If I tell you what I’ve learned you won’t try to beat me next year, will you?”

Edward thought this over. “I might.”

“That’s it,” she declared.

Edward’s shoulders slumped. He should have fibbed a bit.

“I’ll tell you all I know.”

“You will?”

“Yes. You were completely honest with me. That counts for a lot.”

“First, make sure your fur is nice and black. I mean it’s already a nice black, but maybe rub a bit of dark dirt on the lighter spots.”

“My fur?”

“Yes, the judges look at all aspects of a candidate, especially as the stakes get higher.” She spied a mud puddle that was almost dried up. “This is perfect, and matches your black jumpsuit exactly.” She began rubbing the sticky mud on Edward’s lighter spots.

“That tickles.”

“Be still. If you want to have a chance of winning you need to cover all the bases.”

“That’s a sorry joke.”

“Sorry,” she giggled.

“That’s even sorrier.” Edward began to laugh too. He rubbed some mud on her fur.

“What are you doing?”

“Letting you see how it feels. You might just get this far next year.”

“Stop. We need to concentrate on you.”

“Okay, but you gotta admit it’s ticklish.”

“It is kind of itchy.” She brushed the mud off. “But thanks for the lesson.”

Finally, the two were satisfied that Edward was as black as black could be. They approached a group gathering near a creature waving his arms in the air.

“There are a lot more finalists than usual.” Edward did not like that observation from his new friend.

“This is the Balloon Ascent Competition, also known as Two Arms trial. My name is Tigger. That’s Tiger with two g’s. Pronounced Tig-Ger.”

“Two Arms? What’s that mean?” Edward turned to his mentor.

“How many arms do you have?”

“Two.”

“Gonna need both of them.”

“You sure don’t offer much help for volunteering to help.”

“Too much information can be just as bad as too little. I tend to lean toward less is more.”

“Pick up your balloon from the chipmunks at the table over there and follow me.”

Edward ambled toward the table with the chipmunks.

“Blue? Blue? Or blue?”

“I’ll take that blue.”

“That one is already taken.”

“But it’s sitting right there.”

“Taken.”

Edward was not giving up. “Is it special? Is it the one I need to use to win?”

“Too many questions. Come back next year.”

“Wait. Wait. I’ll take this one,” he grabbed the nearest balloon before the chipmunk could protest.

“Sure. That’s a dud. But you won’t win anyway.”

“Such encouragement,” Edward muttered as he held tight to the balloon and walked away.

“That’s part of the process,” Other Edward explained.

“Why?”

“It weeds out all but the most determined.”

“If this balloon is a dud, why even bother?”

“See, worked on you, didn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“The balloon is fine. The chipmunk just wanted you to quit. He’s favoring that Edward who was talking to you earlier.”

“Oh, the one that told me he was going to win and not to bother entering.”

“That one. We call him Edward the Grape because he loves grapes. You can really get him riled up by calling him that.”

“You really are helping me! Thank you.”

“I do want you to win. But maybe more I want Edward the Grape to lose.”

“Get your balloon inflated and tied off over here,” a rabbit yelled at no one in particular and everyone in general.

“While you get your balloon inflated and tied off, I’ll find you a good spot and hold the place for you.”

“Thank you,” Edward called over his shoulder as he dashed to get in line. The line moved fast. Each balloon was inflated with floating gas and tied off in mere seconds. Edward noticed that every contestant was handed a heavy pouch to help keep them on the ground until the signal to begin sounded.

“Is this a good spot?” He had found Other Edward standing firmly, arms crossed, in a spot near a huge tree he supposed was an important prop.

“I’ll say. I barely beat two bears to it. But they were running with pouches and inflated balloons. That gave me the advantage.”

“You are amazing!” Edward was in awe of his good luck to find such a helpful friend.

“Now listen. Tie your balloon to your shoulder strap. You need to be holding it for the actual competition but beyond that the rules don’t apply. Loosen the fastener on your pouch. When the airhorn sounds, wait until all of the other bears have lifted off. Most will do it in a big rush. But there’s no hurry. You have plenty of time to be aloft before the timer clock starts. Release just enough contents of your pouch to slowly drift upward. You want to have enough ballast left over for a slow descent. That will put more time on your record.”

“What’s competition height?”

“It’s marked by floating markers both below and above. Stay within the markers. And be sure to be holding the balloon with at least one paw at all times. Otherwise you’ll be disqualified.”

“How do you win?”

“Hold on to your balloon and stay aloft longer than anyone else.”



Chapter 7

Things Get Cloudy

“Production is happy with the hive.” Rhys danced out of the building. “Oh, wait,. I forgot to mention that it comes with an optional colony. Be right back.” He danced back into the building, skirted around a pile of boxes and announced to the fox that a free colony came with the hive.

“That’s a good perk. Send the swarm to me I’ll see that it gets set up properly.”

“Sounds good, Sly,” replied Rhys, reading the name stitched onto the apron the fox was wearing.

“Not Sly like sly, S’ly like S Leigh.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. It’s a family thing.”

“Cool. I’m used to family names, S’ly.” Rhys barely missed tripping on a box as he left. “Everything is so piecemeal in there,” he observed to himself. He pranced up to Wellington. “Did you find your friends?”

“Not yet. Do you have another assignment?”

“I do,” he waved the piece of paper.

“What’s on it?”

“One blue balloon, one bell pull, one bundle of bare sticks.” Rhys recited.

“Balloon Ascent Competition is about to start!” bellowed a voice over a bullhorn.

“I wonder if Edward made it this far?” All thoughts of the list flew out of Wellington’s head.

“Let’s go see.”

“But your list.” Wellington regained some of his senses.

“It can wait.”

The two hurried over to the place where the sound of the bullhorn was coming from. “Zach!” Wellington spied the young rabbit at the edge of the crowd. “How is Edward doing? Is he still in the running?” Wellington really did not know anything about how the audition worked but he figured that there might be a culling process.

“Wellington!” Zach was mighty glad to see a familiar face. “Edward passed the first two trials with flying fur,” he laughed at his own joke, explaining how Eeyore had to pop Edward out of the hole and fur flew everywhere, and before that he proved to Kanga and Roo that he was a real Edward.

“Oh, no, his fur!” cried Wellington.

“Oh, yes, that’s a good thing.” Zach explained the conditions of the Bear in a Hole Competition.

“Now what?”

“Now the remaining candidates are just about to begin the float aloft, the longest part of the competition.”

“How does it work?”

“Each competitor is given a balloon.”

“A blue balloon?” asked Rhys.

“How did you guess?” asked Zach.

“I had a hunch,” replied Rhys.

“Oh, excuse me,” Wellington interrupted the conversation, annoyed at himself for forgetting his manners. “Rhys meet Zach. Zach meet Rhys, FeliX’s brother. Rhys is collecting pieces for the production department. He’s trying to get a job there.”

“You’re FeliX’s brother? Small world for sure.”

“What does that mean?”

“Didn’t Wellington tell you? He got a mystery message from FeliX and is headed to help him.”

“But I keep getting sidetracked.”

“Let me guess. It has to do with puddles.” Wellington and Zach laughed. Rhys was definitely FeliX’s brother.

“How do we know where Edward is?” Wellington could only admit that from the spectators’ viewing spot all the bears looked the same.

“I noticed a board with some kind of notice on it when we entered this part of the park. Maybe there is information about the competitors on it.” Rhys started trotting toward it.

When the three got to the board they could only sigh. True, there was information about this part of the competition, including the participants. “But they are all called Edward. What good is a number by a name if the name is the same for every single participant?” Zach could not believe the nonsense of it all.

“It’s all for show,” a nearby black bear offered. “There will be only one after this so it really doesn’t matter if you need to figure them out or not. Are you by chance looking for a bear who has little idea what this whole audition involves?”

“That sounds like our Edward.” Wellington was encouraged. “Do you know him?”

“I do, and he could win. I’ve been helping him.”

“Are you a friend of Edward’s?” asked Zach.

“We met at the first competition. I lost. We all want Edward the Grape to lose. He’s so self-centered. So I have been helping your Edward.”

“And you are?” began Zach. “Oh, never mind. I know. Edward. But you’re a girl so can I call you Edie?”

“NO!”

“Okay. Just thought I’d simplify things a bit. How about Gal Edward?”

“Definitely not.”

“But if Gal is good enough for Wonder Woman?”

“Do I look like Wonder Woman? Call me Other Edward. That’s what your Edward calls me.”

Just then a blast from an airhorn sent them all clapping paws and hooves over their ears. “What was that?” Wellington asked.

“The start of the competition.” The group looked skyward to see a plethora of blue balloons vying for a position aloft, each steered by a single black bear. All of this took place near a huge oak tree.

“So many bears,” exclaimed Rhys.

“I heard that it’s a record number to reach this part of the audition,” volunteered Zach. Other Edward nodded.

“How do they pick a winner?”

“The bear who stays aloft the longest.”

“That could take hours,” Rhys observed. “And anyway, why does my list include a blue balloon? There’re plenty right here.”

“For this purpose they use trial balloons,” said Other Edward. “They are very weak and do not last long at all.” She looked at Rhys. “If you’re getting a balloon for the props department, be sure that it is strong and long lasting.”

“And with weak balloons we’ll have a winner soon,” finished Zach.

“Why blue balloons?”

“And why do all the bears look extra black?”

“They are reenacting the story where Winnie-the-Pooh tries to get honey from a beehive in the tree. He pretends to be a black cloud so the bees will not be suspicious.”

Rhys could relate to trying to trick bees. “That’s a lot of black clouds in the sky at one time,” he looked toward the competition. The sky was dark with bear. Suddenly a thunderclap sounded. Then another. And raindrops began to fall.

“Those bears are too convincing!” shouted Zach, running for shelter.

“I’ll say,” exclaimed Wellington above the noise of the gathering storm. He was right on Zach’s heels.

“What about the competitors?” worried Rhys, almost running Wellington down.

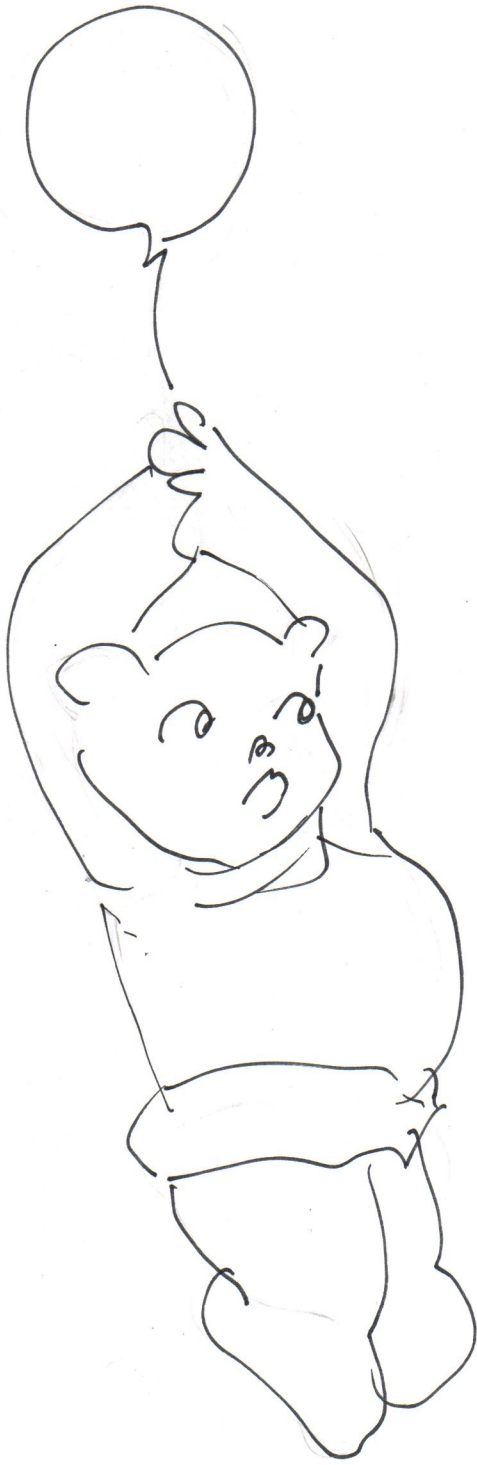
“They’ll be fine,” shouted Other Edward, sprinting to the front. She did not like her fur to get wet and smelly.

“Wait. What?” Wellington’s eyes got wide. “I just realized what FeliX meant in his note. “Puddles means waders. Zach, find the nearest signal location and send a message to Ben to get the waders from my cottage and meet me at Count Donald’s treehouse.”

“Why there?”

“I’ll get Precisely’s bell pull for Rhys.” He glanced at Rhys, who just stood, mouth wide open, in awe of the speed that Wellington put things together.

Zach was happy that he had his food fuel thanks to Wellington.



Chapter 8 Thundgration

Edward heard the distant thunder before anyone else. Keen hearing was one of his special attributes. “This could be bad.” He was floating quite well. There were bears all around him but none too close. He was not sure which one was Edward the Grape, and frankly, he did not want to know. Boom! The thunder was getting closer.

“Is thunder part of the competition?” a bear next to Edward quivered.

“I don’t know,” Edward admitted.

“You’ve never done this either? I thought that I was the only bear that was new to this part of the competition.”

“I read about the competition on a flyer and came right over. Did you read a flyer like I did?” Edward was excited to think there was another bear as clueless as he was.

“Oh, no. I’ve competed many times but I’ve never gotten beyond the Bear in a Hole.”

“I thought that you were a brand newbie like me.” Edward tried not to show his disappointment. “Congratulations on finally getting to the Balloon Ascent. You must be so happy.”

“I was happy but the thunder is really discombobulating. Maybe I don’t want this gig after all.”

“Maybe the storm is headed in another direction. So far we haven’t seen any rain.”

“You think so?”

“There’s a good chance,” Edward fibbed. He had no idea how weather patterns behaved here.

“I think that I felt a drop of rain.”

“Could be sweat,” Edward stalled. He had felt a drop as well.

“Nope, that was real rain. I’m out of here.” With that the bear released air from his already drooping balloon and drifted downward. Three more followed him.

“I’m sure to win now!” a voice to Edward’s right boomed. It sounded right in his ear. So much for not knowing where Edward the Grape was floating. “Did you hear me bears? Give up like those other losers before you get soaked to the bone for no good reason.”

“Leave them alone.” Edward could not help himself.

“Who are you to tell me what to do?”

“Another Edward.”

“Well, another Edward, you are wasting your time trying to beat me. Say, aren’t you that newbie bear I passed on the way over here?” Edward the Grape began to laugh. “Fat chance you have of winning. The only reason you got through Bear in a Hole is because Eeyore booted you through just as you were going to slip through, and lose, on your own.”

“That is not true!”

“Prove it.”

“I cannot. But I was very stuck. Very, very stuck.”

“Sure, sure, sure, anything you say.” It was really raining now. A solid steady rain. Most of the remaining bears decided to quit and try again next season. Some of the balloons were almost out of enough air to support a bear anyway. At that juncture in a typical competition the bears would begin to sway and wiggle, anything that they could think of to slow the balloon down. It was the crowd’s favorite part of the competition. There were consolation prizes for various antics such as Most Creative, Longest Upside Down, Surprising Rally – things like that. Some bears did not even care about winning the big prize. They entered hoping to win a Balloon Ascent consolation prize.

Edward was so soaked that he decided to play on his curiosity to take his mind off his misery. “How’d you get to be known as Edward the Grape?”

“Edward the Great.”

“Nope, Edward the Grape.”

“Great.”

“Grape. I paid very careful attention to how it was pronounced.”

“You’ve got bad ears.”

“I do not. You’re just embarrassed because you have a silly nickname.”

“Please, I would never let such a ridiculous thing bother me.” It was raining in torrents now. They were the only two bears left.

“We could quit together and let them pick one of us.”

“I think not. I plan to win this thing without question or on some absurd decision.”

Just then a gust of wind blew Edward the Grape toward a branch of the tree.

“Watch out,” Edward warned.

Edward the Grape did his best to turn the weakening balloon. He managed to avoid the main part of the branch but his cord got stuck in a twig.

“You’re sure to win now.” Edward cursed his bad luck.

“What are you talking about?” Edward the Grape fumed. “You cannot win if you have to be rescued. Even if you are the last bear in the air. Don’t you know the rules?”

“Not really. Only the ones Other Bear told to me.”

“Just go ahead and win. I don’t care.”

“I don’t want to win that way either.” Edward had maneuvered his balloon closer to Edward the Grape’s.

“What are you doing?”

“Coming to help you.”

“That would get us both disqualified. No help from anyone.”

“Your other choice is to lose.”

“Not if I can get my balloon cord free.”

“Good luck with that. I can see the tangle. It’s a mess.”

“Be quiet.”

Edward watched as Edward the Grape inched his way up the cord to the tangle. The storm did not make it any easier. Carefully he grabbed the cord with one paw and began his attempt to wiggle it loose.

“Use your teeth, too,” suggested Edward.

“Good idea,” Edward the Grape reluctantly conceded. He knew he could not let go of the cord with the other paw even for a second. That would be immediate disqualification.

“Looks like the storm is easing up.” Edward saw a break in the clouds and a tiny hint of blue sky. His balloon began to falter. He remembered Other Edward’s advice and lessened the load just a bit. The balloon steadied.

“Gmngmpph...” Edward the Grape groaned and then more clearly, “Got it!” His balloon was free. It began sinking downward at a swift rate. “Oh, no, you don’t!” He knew the same trick with the ballast and quickly lightened the load.

The storm had nearly abated. The sun was coming out and a rainbow forming. “What strange weather,” observed Edward.

The ground was approaching. The bears were side by side. Each reached for his ballast bag. Both were empty.

Edward looked over at Edward the Grape and began to wiggle this way and that. “C’mon, balloon, slow down.”

Edward the Grape began a slow sway. His idea was working. He was slowing down more than Edward.

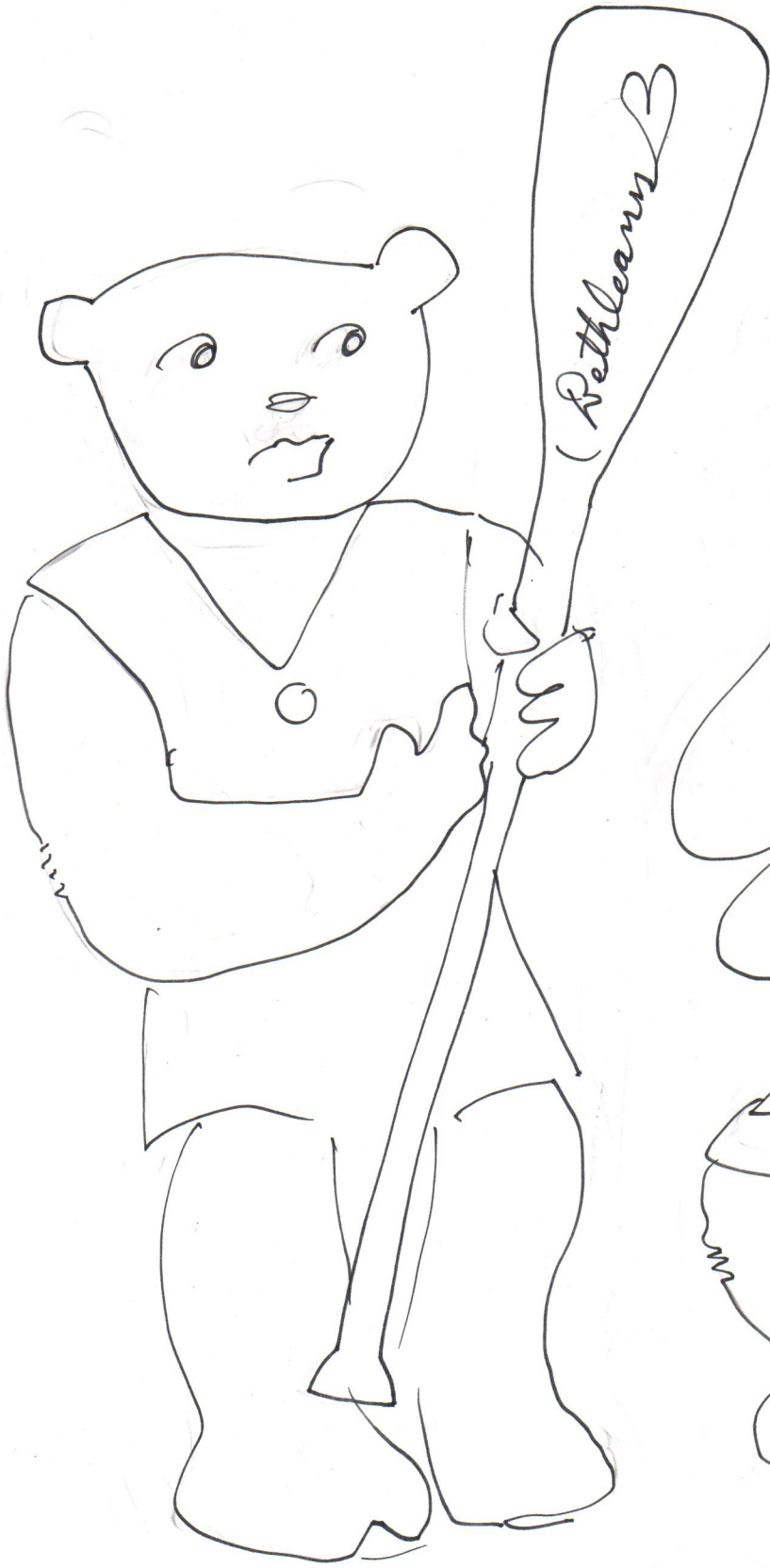
Edward changed his tactic to match Edward the Grape’s. “No fair.”

“Pretty sure that’s not in the rules.”

The judges watched in awe as the two continued side by side, occasionally changing the lead but always returning to a matching pace.

The ground was really close. Edward bent his knees. Edward the Grape did one better. He pulled his knees up as much as he could. He really was in grape shape.

Thud. It was over. “It’s a tie!” declared the judges.



Chapter 9

Paddles & Puddles

Wellington could not decide whether to put his cape into action or not. He could certainly use the extra time but he was rather unsure about how magic worked around the Hundred Aker Wood. And so he compromised. He took off at a brisk pace, much faster than he would have enjoyed, but time was of the essence.

He had not gone far when he saw a familiar face approaching. "Quite a pace you're on."

"Georg?" Wellington was delighted to see his good friend. "Is it really you?"

"One and the same," his favorite bear friend affirmed.

"What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

"Hundred Aker Wood annual paddleboard competition."

"Where's your board?"

"For the competition this year, the organizers decided to supply boards."

"Odd idea."

"They want the playing field to be more even."

"But you bring your own paddle, I see. And, of course, competitors are not all the same weight or size."

"But everybody will have the same board."

"Right." Wellington was glad for the chat break. He was getting rather winded, but knew he needed to get going. Maybe he would employ his cape.

"What are you doing here?" Georg was very curious.

"Bethleann didn't tell you?" Wellington was surprised. Georg and Bethleann shared everything. They were a solid couple.

"I came straight from the paddle shop."

"Is it a good idea to compete with a brand-new paddle?"

"It's not new, just prettied up a bit." Georg showed Wellington where Bethleann with a big heart was painted onto the paddle.

"It's beautiful."

"Thanks! Would love to chat more, Wellington, but I need to get going. I'm running a bit late." Georg beat Wellington to the punch of shoving off.

"He didn't even get the scoop." Wellington was rather impressed with Georg's focus on winning. He decided that he would take a chance with his cape. He stepped off the pathway and chanted a basic flying spell. There were so many flying spells; for speed, for height, for carrying extra passengers and on and on. Wellington chose one that was comparatively slow but also barely invasive into the world of magic.

In short order he was at Count Donald's abode. The count's daughter, Precisely, used to live with her father, but her heart belonged to Uncle Wells. When Uncle Wells figured out a way for her to join him in the WEB, she was ecstatic. Wellington was let in on this secret romance at the very last, and as much as he missed Precisely, he was happy that she and Uncle Wells were together.

“Where can that Ben be?” he fretted. He knocked hard on the door. Pulling the bell pull would be a useless means to summon Count Donald from his study at the top of the tree house. A well-appointed room with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. There were cozy lounge chairs and a massive desk piled high with math papers and books, Count Donald fondly called it his rafter roost.

“Who’s there?” he called down the winding stairwell, slightly perturbed at being disturbed.

“Just I, Count Donald. Wellington Rabbit. I need to borrow Precisely’s bell pull for a stretch of time.” Wellington knew that Count Donald would not mind and would actually forget about it as soon as he dove back into his math world. He loved working on complex math challenges, Mersenne primes being a particular favorite.

“Precisely’s not here,” he shouted. “Help yourself. No time to chat now. Close to figuring out a tough one.”

“I know she’s not,” muttered Wellington under his breath. And then loud enough to hear in the rafter room he called through the mail slot in the door, “Thank you!” Wellington gently took down the bell pull and tucked it into his haversack. “C’mon, Ben.”

As if on cue Ben rounded the corner, waving a pair of galoshes. “I’ve got the waders!”

Wellington could not believe his eyes. “Ben, those are galoshes, not waders.”

“These aren’t waders?” Ben was chagrined.

“Nope. But you tried.” Wellington did not want the earnest rabbit to feel unworthy. “Take these on to the gang in the Hundred Aker Wood. I’m sure they can be put to good use.”

“How do I get there?”

“Follow the Wealdway Ramblin Path. It’s starts just beyond Gertie’s.”

“But what about the waders?”

“I’ll fetch them and meet you at the Hundred Aker Woods after I’ve located FeliX. I have a feeling that he is near there.”

“Sorry to have messed up.” Ben felt bad.

“Never you mind that. We’ll probably need both before the mystery is all over.”

Ben and Wellington waved goodbyes, and each took off in their separate directions. Wellington again considered using his cape since he was far into unplanned time, but his cottage was close by. He picked up his pace and was home in a quick shake of a rabbit’s tail. Wellington knew that the waders were in the closet with the unpredictable coats.

“But just inside,” he reminded himself, which is the only reason he had asked Ben to do that job. Those biting coats could be very nasty. Wellington hummed a little soothing song to the coats, just to be safe, and snatched the waders before the coats could fully wake up.

He latched the back door for the second time in the same day and gathered up his cape, no doubt this time about using it to get where he needed to go fast. “I hope I’m guessing right,” he rubbed his lucky foot and invoked the Fly High charm.

When he got closer to the Hundred Aker Wood, what he saw gave him cause for alarm. There were huge puddles of water where water should not be, and beyond that, the beaver dam in the stream was straining to stay in place. If it broke, torrents of water would crash through and create havoc in a multitude of places.

Wellington spied FeliX pacing up and down, doing his best to direct the always efficient beavers with stopgap measures. As good as they were, this threatening breach had the potential to completely overwhelm them.

“Hold on,” Wellington cried, swooping down with waders extended. “Help is on the way!”



Chapter 10

A Sticky Situation

“What do you mean, a tie?” both Edwards shouted in unplanned unison.

“We mean neither of you touched down before or after the other,” the head judge explained. “Therefore it is a tie.”

“That cannot be.” Edward moaned.

“That will not be.” Edward the Grape stomped his foot.

“That is it exactly.” The judge was losing patience.

“Now what?” asked Edward.

“We will have a fourth competition, of course. A tiebreaker.” The judge was beginning to worry that these two bears had stayed aloft too long. A tiebreaker only seemed natural.

“What sort of tiebreaker?” Edward the Grape did not like to be in uncharted territory.

“Just never you mind. Follow us.” The head judge was being exasperatingly vague. He led the way around huge puddles that had developed due to the unexpected downpour.

“FeliX would love all of these puddles.” Rhys had left the group to gather the bunch of smooth sticks. He was figuring on joining them before the competition started. There were deep puddles in every direction. He tiptoed around each, gathering sticks where he could. Finally he had what he considered a nice bunch.

“These are the best I have ever seen.” S’ly was impressed.

Rhys blushed. “I did my best to gather ones that matched in size and were super smooth with just the right amount of bark left on. The devil is in the details.”

“Want a job?”

“Huh?” Rhys tried to look surprised. His plan was working!

“I’m looking to go on a long R&R myself. Don’t see why the main cast should have all the fun.”

“What sort of job?” Rhys played it cool.

“Why, my job, of course.” S’ly winked. “Wouldn’t trust it to just anyone. Reason why I haven’t taken a vacation in years.”

“Wow.” This time Rhys really was surprised and almost speechless.

“The production is nothing without us. We prop the actors up. Get it? Prop them up,” she laughed. “But we really do. Otherwise they’re just mere actors on a stage. To the last syllable of recorded time and all of that.”

“When do I start?” Rhys pinched himself to be sure it was really happening.

“Give me a day or two to bring the slower ones up to speed,” she said, indicating the sloths. “Good workers but speed is definitely not their need.”

“Okay, then, and thank you!” Rhys literally danced out of the office.

“Don’t forget you owe me a bell pull ... and a blue balloon!” she called after him.

“I’m on it, boss,” he hollered back. “And thanks again for the job!” He ran to find the group. All he needed to do was follow the shouting. “It must have started already.” He ran faster.

“Over here, Rhys.” Zach waved an ear when he spied his new friend who was scanning the crowd for a familiar face.

“What’s happening?”

“Apparently the beaver dam holding the stream to a comfortable flow has been compromised and reinforcements are not working.” Zach gushed all of this out.

“Didn’t Wellington get the waders to FeliX in time? He can fix anything.”

“Unknown.”

“It would only be a water water everywhere problem but the Hundred Aker Wood paddleboard race has already started. That unexpected downpour just added trouble.”

At that moment they all heard a small voice floating a distress signal. “Help! Help! Somebody help me, please.”

“Who’s that?” Zach was all ears.

“Where’s that?” Rhys was on high alert.

“It’s Piglet, one of the main characters,” gasped Other Edward. “He must be stuck in his house. They cancelled that story line a long time ago. Too messy.”

“What story line?” Rhys was uneducated about Winnie-the-Pooh.

“The one where Piglet gets stuck in his house after days of rain.” Other Edward could not understand how anyone would not know the famous Hundred Aker Wood stories.

“There was only one storm,” Rhys stated.

“But it was huge!” Being small, Zach got to the meat of the problem right away.

“What should we do?” Other Edward was out of ideas before she even started.

“Thank me.” Ben walked up, carrying a very dry Piglet. “Wellington was right. These galoshes did come in handy.”

“Maybe FeliX did fix the dam. Maybe the shouting is for the racers. Let’s hurry.” Rhys was excited. He had never seen a paddleboard race.

“What about the tiebreaker?” Zach did not want to miss that event.

“What tiebreaker?” asked Ben.

“I’ll explain while we walk.” Zach pulled Ben along. “C’mon.”

“The judges headed toward the stream. Likely we’ll find them there.” Other Edward did not want to miss the final bear challenge either.

As they got closer to the stream, shouts of glee and groans of misery reached the group’s ears. Rhys shoved to the front of the crowd. “There’s a big bear in the lead!”

“Georg!” shouted Ben and Zach together. They pushed through to get next to Rhys. “He’s our guardian.”

“You have a bear for a guardian?”

“We’ll explain later.” Ben wanted to concentrate entirely on the race.

“Poohsticks tiebreaker starting now at the Walk Over Bridge!”

“Do the judges not know about the paddleboard race?”

“The race ends just before the bridge so it shouldn’t be a problem.” Other Edward even doubted her own words.

Georg was in the lead but two competitors were coming up fast.

“I wish FeliX could be here,” cried Rhys. “It’s so exciting!”

“I am here,” a very familiar voice sounded in his ear.

“FeliX!” Rhys hugged his big brother. “You’re here.”

“All four hooves. Wellington got to me just in the nick of time.”

“Georg! Georg!” the crowd was wild. He was their favorite and he had won the race.

“We’ll celebrate properly later, gang,” Wellington shouted. “The tiebreaker is about to start.” Everyone headed for the bridge. “Let me help you, Georg!” Wellington called to his friend who was landing his board.

Not one to brag, Georg nevertheless allowed himself one moment. “Now no one can call me a bear with very little brawn.”

“No one would ever call you that! We need to hurry. Edward is in the final competition.”

“Edward?” Georg was excited but confused. “Our Edward?”

“Yes, he’s competing for the role of fill in Edward Bear in the Hundred Aker Wood production while the actual Winnie-the-Pooh goes on vacation.”

“Edward, do your best!” Georg yelled with renewed energy. The paddle board race had been a tough one.

“Bears, drop your Poohsticks on the count of three. First stick to clear the bridge wins. Line judges are located on either side of the finish,” the head judge prepared to start the race.

Edward looked at Edward the Grape. “This is it.”

Edward the Grape looked at Edward. “Prepare to lose.”

The judge counted and on three, two sticks dropped into the water.

Edward’s fan club cheered for his entry to win. No one was cheering for Edward the Grape. “Don’t fret,” said Other Edward. “His ego is cheerleader enough.”

And then one stick cleared the bridge. It was well ahead of the other. “It’s mine,” shouted Edward the Grape. “I win!”

“Oh no,” moaned Other Edward. “We’ll never hear the end of it.”

“No worries.” Rhys pulled himself up proudly. Being in production, he knew details the others did not. “First place wins a trip around the world with the new traveling show. He’ll be gone for months.” He tucked the bell pull Wellington had secured for him to almost complete his piece list for S’ly into his saddle bag. “Second place gets to stay right here at Hundred Aker Wood and take over for Winnie-the-Pooh while he’s on vacation.”

“Edward, you’re going to be in the show!” Georg hugged his little black bear. “And I didn’t even know that you were auditioning!”

“I had lots of help,” Edward looked at the group. “Thanks to all of you, I get to be the Hundred Aker Wood semi-resident bear!”

Epiloguz

“Cake?” asked PJ. “I’m in. Let’s go.” The boys were still camping but when they heard that Bethleann had baked a cake to celebrate the victories of Georg and Edward, they decided to head home early. “I love cake! I hope there’s enough for seconds.”

“I’m sure Bethleann baked a generous cake.” Ben set his brother’s concerns at ease. “You know she doesn’t like anyone to leave her table hungry.” They hustled home and arrived just as the other guests were doing the same.

“How’s the new job, Rhys? I’m PJ. Nice to meet you.” PJ intended to be brought up to speed fast about all that he had missed.

“Piece of cake,” said Rhys confidently. “Those sloths are slow but thorough.”

“Did you ever find a blue balloon?” asked Zach.

“The sloths did. They found me a whole box of quality ones tucked away on a top shelf. They are my star workers.”

“Everyone gather round. Let’s sing to our winners,” Bethleann beamed at Georg and Edward.

“For they are jolly good fellows, for they are jolly good fellows, for the are jolly good fellows, that nobody can deny!” the group sang in unison.

“Now can we have cake?” asked PJ.

“As many pieces as you can eat,” smiled Bethleann as she handed him a plate.



The Story of the Other Wellington

One spring day just about Easter time we found a rabbit under our house. That part is not too unusual if you know that our house is on stilts, or pilings as they are called around the Outer Banks of North Carolina where we live. He seemed rather tame, and we did not want any harm to come to him, so we found a box and persuaded him to enter it. We were cautious because we knew rabbits could bite. We had two cats, and so pondered what to do with him (we were supposing it was a him). He behaved so politely, not the biting sort at all.

We called our mail lady, who had lovely pens for her pet rabbits, hoping that she would take him. Joan came right over. One look and she said that he was too tame to be wild and must be one of several she had seen around the neighborhood. She figured that their owner had grown tired of them and turned them loose, so she had begun feeding them cookies.

Our community is a gated one on a fair-sized island. It has many deep-water canals and miles of slow speed limit roads, most ending on cul-de-sacs at the end of small finger like peninsulas. There was no leash law, so dogs roamed freely. Our lost bunny hopped his way from several streets over and around a nice sized pond to our home, located on one of those peninsula cul-de-sacs. Already amazing!

Joan agreed to take him home with her. Before she left, she asked us what we wanted to name him. We, of course, said 'Wellington' although only the first book had been written.

Joan gave us daily reports and said that Wellington was turning out to be such a sweet rabbit that she and her husband, Walt, could not put him in a pen. They let him live in the house with them, which he did until the day he faded. Joan said she had never, ever seen such a dear sweet lovable bunny as Wellington. He lived up to his name every hop of the way. Joan and Walt have no children, so Wellington filled a special space in their lives.

Joan, Walt and Wellington moved to Idaho. We had a good-bye party. We kept up. Wellington sent Easter cards. Then one Easter a choked-up Joan called to say Wellington was very sick and she was worried about his dignity of life. He had broken his hip and it was not healing well. The cast he had to wear was tiring. Just as she reached a heavy decision, Wellington got better. Joan immediately cancelled the appointment. Wellington gave Joan and Walt three more months of love and devotion before he crossed the Rainbow Bridge on July 24, 2003.

I sent an email to Joan asking what she recalled about Wellington's beginning and this is what she replied. "I know that he had been running around the Harbour for at least two years before he made it to your house. I would see Wellington and his three friends around the Shipley's house and give them cookies almost everyday. The four had disappeared shortly before you found Wellington and I heard that someone had caught two of the bunnies. I don't know what happened to the other one.... I'm guessing it wasn't good. I sometimes wonder if there are any little Wellington descendants around the Harbour. One spring I saw several baby bunnies in someone's yard that looked gray rather than the usual brown of a wild rabbit. I'd like to think that some of them made it to maturity and have happy little grandbunnies eating people's gardens. Take care and God Bless you all.... Joan."

And that is the story of the Other Wellington.

