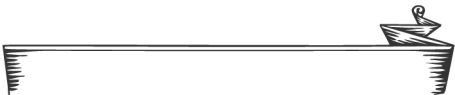



To my family, who have put up with more nuts than they ever
cared to encounter.



Accolades for “Nuts to You”



Judy Burns, Emmy Award Winner, “Star Trek”

From the imagination and pen of internationally sold screenwriter, Bobbi Boes, comes a classic retelling of the Christmas favorite, “The Nutcracker”. Having already adapted the ballet story into a musical, Ms. Boes has delved deeper into her characters to create a joyful new narrative that will delight both children and adults. Weaving the story of Clara who is being hounded by a mother determined to marry her off for status and money to the poor beleaguered Mouse-Prince who is trying to escape his villainous Mouse Queen mother, we move seamlessly between the sugar-filled world of the Nutcracker and the candy people he protects to the human world where a Pied Piper’s enchantment once freed the world of from rodents but deprived it of love. Never fear. At the end of the Nutcracker’s great adventure, love, faith and hope conquer all... except one little mouse.

Mary Huckstep, Author & Humor Award Winner

HOORAY! I just finished your wonderful tale! And that funny clever narrator's voice is still sounding in my ears and making me smile. Love the way you tell this story. Love the story. Gotta say that my favorite character is Reggie. On every point of his journey.

Ruth Williams, TV writer

“Nuts to You” is truly very clever, very witty and funny! The “I’m going to tell you a story” narrator whispering in your ear ... she is clever, funny and knows how to tell a tale. I really really like that I love all the characters ... very Roald Dahl (even without the candy) These are silly, fun, ridiculous characters you can see. LOVE the guy in the attic cracking nuts. Brilliant. Beautifully written (you are so good - damn you!). Very, very visual. Make it a screenplay and Disney will steal it from you and make a million. Love the narrator's observations about life - and the life's lessons chapter title

Mardi Chalmers, Librarian Extraordinaire

“Nuts to You” is great fun to read. Although it is a fairy tale, it is complex enough that there are several levels of contemporary readability in the naughtiness involved:

the “tween” interest, adult-level wordplay, and its general humor. “Nuts to You” feels just the ticket for adults reading to children (and getting a good laugh for themselves once in a while) and for tweens reading for themselves.



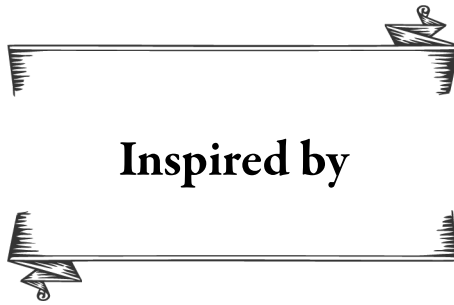


NUTS TO YOU

The Nutcracker Retold



Bobbi Boes



Inspired by

“In a Nutshell Musical”

by

Bobbi Boes

&

Beverly Stephenson







CHAPTER 1

A History Lesson



Everyone knows the tale of the Pied Piper and how he piped the mice out of the village of Hamelin. Well, it turns out that the Pied Piper is a not-so-ordinary toy and clock maker, who happens to have a magical pipe, and a few other tricks up his sleeve. Drosselmeir by name, a famous rat-catcher by fame, or so everyone thought. Although he is a mechanical wizard, he never actually built a mousetrap. Instead, he used his magical pipe to pipe the mice away, through the clock and into another land, the Land of Sweets.

Which might cause problems, if you think about it. I mean, mice, in Candy Land?

However, when Drosselmeir rid Hamelin of the mice that were literally eating the villagers out of house and home, he accidentally piped

their children out through the clock, too. And now, those very children have lived in the Land of Sweets for so long and eaten nothing but sweets for breakfast, lunch, and dinner – that they’ve turned into actual Sweeties, which proves, once and for all, that you really are what you eat. Sweeties are very kind, very cute

and very sweet, but are so lacking in the long-term memory department, that they have completely forgotten about the mice and at times, even their own homes and parents.

But not Drosselmeir! He rues the day he piped both children and mice into a land made entirely of sugar. He is under a cloud of guilt, as the children grow more and more sugary and helpless every day, as their diet, and the Land itself, makes them less the children they were and more the true inhabitants of the Land of Sweets. And he fears that if he can’t return the children home soon, they will be spoiled forever, which always happens when children eat too much candy.

And Drosselmeir knows the only thing keeping the mice away is the fact that he piped them deep into the wilderness, beyond the borders of the Land of Sweets. But he fears it is only a question of time before the mice find their way back to the Land of Sweets.

And then what will happen to the Sweeties, who grow more sugary and tasty-looking with each passing day?

Drosselmeir knows that his nephew and apprentice, Franz, longs to return home, to Hamelin and Clara. However their way out, the clock, broke on their way in, and now there is no way back.

So, Drosselmeir remains in the Land of Sweets, frantic to find the famous magic nut, the Krakatuk. For Drosselmeir knows that if he could only find the Krakatuk, then he could weave a spell so strong that no mouse would dare to even sneak a taste of candy. The Land of Sweets would be safe, forever, from any mouse who just happened to be hungry. And if the Land of Sweets is safe and intact, then the mice can’t find their way back to Hamelin.

But here is where nephew and uncle disagree. Franz wants to fix the tower clock that dominates the castle yard. After all, his Uncle Drosselmeir is the Wizard of All Things Mechanical and Franz is his apprentice.



So, Franz is betting on good old trial and error to fix the clock. Then, with the passage in the clock passage, they could take the children back to Hamelin. And Franz could go to the Stahlbaum's house where he hopes that Clara awaits. Therefore, master and apprentice have agreed to disagree. And so, each works on their own tasks – one trying to find the nut and the other trying to fix the clock.

But it's been so long since they all came through the clock, that the reason Drosselmeir has Franz cracking nuts all day long has been forgotten by the Sweeties. Every week or so, Drosselmeir returns to his

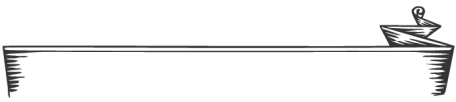
workshop from the four corners of the land, where he has gathered nuts of all shapes and sizes (which has created quite a shortage of nuts). It is there in Drosselmeir's workshop that Franz, with his mighty jaws and strong, strong teeth, cracks nuts, looking for the one Nut that cannot be cracked. The Krakatut. All the while, Drosselmeir hovers near by, hoping that each nut is the Nut and the Land of Sweets will be safe from an invasion of mice.

Meanwhile, the Sweeties go on as usual, but with the added benefit of having lots of nuts to put into their candy and confectionery – even if the nuts come from a nutty old man and his very delicious nephew, who is pure eye candy – if you know what I mean. Franz is such a delight to the eyes that he has captured the attention of the Princess of the realm, who is really a child from Hamelin.

This self-ordained princess, Pirlipat, (sister of Clara, who is definitely *not* a princess) demands that Franz bring her freshly-cracked nuts every morning, every noon-time and every evening – just so she can feast her eyes upon him.


Yum!

And so, the days come and the days go, and the Sweeties dote on Franz, while out of earshot of course, they affectionately mock the nutty old man who, alone in his tower, dreams of finding a magic Nut.



CHAPTER 2

One Particular Morning



One particular morning, as the Sweeties prepared the toilette for Princess Pirlipat – that’s prepared NOT repaired, and ‘toilette’ back then meant getting dressed and ready for the day – so get your mind out of the toilet!

Like I was saying, one particular morning, like every other morning, the candy smith was busy at his forge pounding out the peppermint stays and lifesaver candy hoops for the Princess’s dress. In the sewing rooms, the seamstresses piped icing onto the puff pastry skirts and sleeves of the dress of the day. The royal milliners spun sugar into a fabulous crown for her royal head, while the wig and shoe makers fashioned a cotton candy wig and licorice slippers, respectively, but in

reality, not with much respect. For although the Princess was the liege of their land, she created too much work, because candy-wear, unlike wash-and-wear, can only be worn once.

So this particular morning, like every other morning, the Sweeties labored first thing to dress and feed their Princess. Mother Ginger, the matronly chatelaine, chided the Gingerbread men, to “Hurry, hurry, hurry!” Then she hustled them up and down the zillion-plus castle stairs until their buttons burst from their efforts to catch their breath. But Mother Ginger was not satisfied until, at last, Coffee brewed the royal drink and the pastry chefs had pulled the morning cakes from their ovens.

Then the three Tea maids crept up the stairs to deliver the morning tray to the very chamber where the Princess slept. They had the hardest, scariest job of all – for they must wake the Princess. And the Princess, like so many other spoiled children I know, was a great big G-R-U-M-P, grump, in the morning. The only thing that saved the maids from a pillow thumping was the fact they were so acrobatic. They could serve her bed tray with all manner of flips and feats, which came in quite handy. For they were quite short and her bed was quite tall, so standing on one another’s shoulders while carrying a tray was no problem at all.

On good days, the Princess laughed. On bad days, she yelled, as she demanded, “Nuts!” Then everyone would scramble to find Franz and make sure he was quick with the cracking.

Well, on this particular morning – because we are talking about this particular morning and not any of the other morning – on this particular morning, the Princess opened one eye, pulled the sheet over her head, and then pulled it back down and reached for her pillow.

With the agility born only from practice, the three little Teas flipped off one another’s shoulders into separate corners of the room. Caught the flying cups and saucers and air-born cakes before rushing out of the room, down the stairs, and out the castle doors.

While from behind them, in her tower, Princess Pirlipat screamed, “Nuts! I’m nuts for him! He drives me wild, and all I think or need or want are nuts! Just look at him! He’s oh-so-cute! A big strong jaw, a mighty bite. Nuts! I’m going nuts!”

“Where is the boy? The one who cracks the nuts, the one who drives me nuts! All day long I watch and wait and salivate for the boy who brings me nuts!”

“From my tower, I look down on those who cater to my whims, but never have I ever seen, someone who really fills my need. Everyday I’m all alone, way up here upon my throne.”

“Down below me, sweetness reigns, but upon this higher plain, all that sugar hurts the eye. It coats the tongue and makes a lump inside of me. I’m sick to death of all things sweet; the sugared please and candied thanks.”

“I want a little salt today – so, give me nuts! Cause I am nuts – plain nuts, oh nuts, for him!”

As the Gingerbread men fled from the Princess, they, and all the other Sweeties, ran, ran, ran as fast as they could through the castle courtyard to Drosselmeir’s workshop. Breathless, they skidded to a stop, bumping into each other – thump, thump, thump!

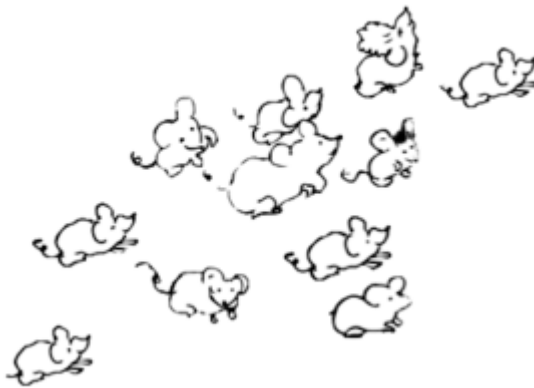
And Franz knew that on this particular morning, the entire land of Sweets needed his nuts. And he wished, like he did on every other morning, his uncle Drosselmeir would find that particular Nut he was looking for. Then Franz could go home and see his favorite friend, Clara – even if she was a girl.

Except, on this particular morning – as Franz kneeled and presented a golden plate of freshly-cracked nuts to Princess Pirlipat, and the Princess batted her eyes and stared at him in a hungry way – Franz realized that he was glad Clara was a girl. Especially since she was not a very silly girl like the one before him – on this particular morning, like every other morning.



CHAPTER 3

The Piper and The Piped



If your education so far has included many fairy tales, then you will know the story of “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.” But if your readings have not included the tale, here it is in a nutshell. The village of Hamelin was overrun with mice. The people hired a Piper to get rid of the mice. He did. But they refused to pay him, so he, out of spite, piped away all the children. And the poor children were lost forever.

The story is a strong warning to all children to remind their parents to pay their bills!

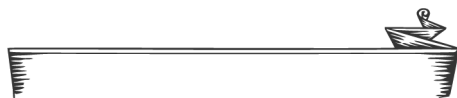
Did you ever wonder about the mice in that story? Think how ticked off and upset they were to be booted out of the warm kitchens and the sweet spots they had gnawed for weeks to get in to! And I can tell you from personal experience – you do not want to mess with a hungry rodent. They become, rather, shall we say – unreasonable?

After Drosselmeir had played a magical tune to lure all the mice through the grandfather clock, and into a Land of Lack, the Mouse Queen and all her sons and their wives and babies wandered around in the wilderness, eating seeds and drinking from cactus and occasionally feasting on some hiker's lost lunch – which in my opinion, is what mice should eat instead of my stash of chocolate-covered cherries or apples from the basket on my kitchen counter.

But mice disagree.

For years, the Mouse Queen has held a big-time, mother-of-all-grudges against Drosselmeir. She's fumed and fussed, ranted and raved, griped and groaned, and scratched out a living in the wilderness.

From their wilderness, these mice could see a land of milk and honey, the Land of Sweets, and they would do anything to get in.



CHAPTER 4

The Nut



One day, the Mouse Queen's famished family bumped into a tree and was showered with nuts. Before you could say, "Three Blind Mice," all the nuts were gobbled and gone. All but one Nut.

This Nut was a beautiful, golden Nut that hung from the highest branch. It was the biggest, most delicious looking Nut the Mouse Queen had ever seen. Saliva dripped from every snout of every mouse,

as the entire Mouse family craned their necks to stare up, up, up to the top of the tree.

The Mouse Queen quickly sent dozens of her sons up the tree, but the trunk was too slick to climb and they all slid into a heap at the bottom. She ordered the tallest mice to form stirrups with their paws so other mice could climb into the lower branches, but when they did, the branches dipped to the ground – and then, like a catapult, whipped high in the air and sling-shot a dozen mice into a nearby pond.

Determined to get that Nut, the Mouse Queen whipped off her royal robe and ordered all the mice to grab the edges. Then she took her youngest son, the littlest mouse-of-all, and tossed him into the middle. Yelling, “One, two, three!” all the mice bounced young Reginald Rhatt on the impromptu blanket and threw him high into the air. Higher and higher he went until he sailed higher than the tree.

He was so scared that he grabbed the Nut and held on for dear life.

No amount of advice from the ground, “Gnaw the stem through!” or “Bounce a bit, dear!” had any effect on little Reggie. He just hung on for dear life and sniffled. So, the Mouse Queen ordered one mouse after another to climb on each other’s shoulders and form a living ladder. Then she trod on their snouts and grabbed their whiskers to climb all the way to the top of the tree, where Reggie was now sobbing in earnest.

With a snip of her sharp teeth, she cut loose the Nut. But her weight, which was considerable (for she always took more than her share of breakfast, lunch and dinner) combined with the Nut’s weight, were too much for the mouse-made ladder and it began to sway. Reggie scrambled off the Nut and clung to his mummy’s back and that was all it took.

Down they fell! It was a mouse mess! Tails and whiskers and claws and paws in a jumbled mound at the base of the tree.

And up from that pile came the hand of the Mouse Queen holding the Nut. She grew taller and taller, until she was head and shoulders above the rest. This gave her the advantage she needed – as all the

mice wanted a bite of that Nut. She held the Nut high over her head, but couldn't stop the really-hungry, really-mean-and-mangy mice, who climbed on top of each other in a roiling, toiling boil from which every once-in-a-while, a mouse would burst out to snap at the Nut.

Do you have any idea how wide a mouse can open its mouth? Would you believe that their whole mouth unhinges and their jaws open from their backs to their chests? It is pretty scary. If you believe it. Anyway, that's what these mice did, and when they clamped their wide-open jaws down on the Nut, they broke every one of their teeth – one mouse, right after another mouse.

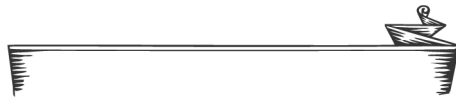
(Unfortunately for them, they were very slow learners.)

But the Mouse Queen kept growing, and pretty soon, she was taller by twice than all the other mice. And that's the only reason the whole clan doesn't wear dentures. She put a stop to all their nonsense with a quick crack on the head – with the Nut – to the next mouse. Now their jaws dropped to the ground, not in hunger, but in astonishment – because that unlucky mouse that was thumped on the head had gone 'Poof!' and turned into a wind-up toy mouse!

As the toy mouse spiraled around and around, all the mice edged away until they formed a huge circle around the Mouse Queen. When the toy mouse finally unwound and stopped at the feet of the Mouse Queen, she gave a wicked smile. Ripping the tattered lace from Reggie's cravat, she bound the Nut to her scepter, and then lifted the Nut up high, as every single mouse cheered and bowed down before the Magic Nut, Krakatuk.

For this was the very Magic Nut which Drosselmeir sought.





CHAPTER 5

Musings on “Someday”



Horizons are a funny thing – you can never really tell how far away they are. In the evening, when the sun sets over the sea, they feel forever-and-a-day away, but when the harvest moon rises over the hill outside my kitchen window, I believe I can walk out my door and step right onto the edge of the horizon.

Worst of all are the “someday” horizons, the ones you keep looking for, but never happen. Some are good. For example, “Someday,” your mother tells you, “we’ll go to Disneyland.” Then you spend the next umpteen million years waiting.

But the ones that make me shiver under my covers at night and worry about the door to my closet are the “Someday something bad will happen” type of some days. These are the ones delivered by teachers and parents and relatives who hardly know you but think they can run your lives. These somedays include, “Someday your bike will get run over if you leave it in the drive.” And the more ominous, “Someday *you’ll* get run over if you don’t watch out for cars!”

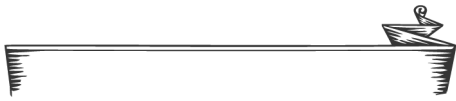
And finally, there are the “somedays of our minds.” These somedays we create all by our little old lonesome. The “Someday Mom’s going to find out I” dot, dot, dot. That someday, when you know you will have to pay for something you did. Be it intentional or unintentional, you screwed something up or accidentally created a rotten situation for yourself or someone else. These somedays hang out with us every mo-

ment of every day. And if we forget them while enjoying something else, it can all be ruined when we remember - that recompense is out there, waiting for us. It's just over the horizon.

The problem with someday horizons is the anticipation. And ever since Drosselmeir cleared out the mice, he's been worried that "someday" the mice would return.


His someday is today.

And it ain't going to be pretty.



CHAPTER 6

When Someday Comes



The longer the Mouse Queen had the Magic Nut, Krakatuk, the bigger she grew. And the bigger she grew, the hungrier she got. And the hungrier she got, the more she thought of all the goodies to eat in the Land of Sweets. And the more she thought of all the goodies to eat in the Land of Sweets, the angrier she became. And the angrier she became, the more she wanted to kick Drosselmeir out of the Land of Sweets so she could eat all the candy and cake she wanted, for as long as she wanted, whenever she wanted.

Someday, her chance would come.

Then the Mouse Queen noticed all her sons and daughters and their sons and daughters and all the cousins, too, had been growing

right along with her. Maybe not as fast as she did – but after all she was the Queen and nobody had better, ever, be bigger than her!

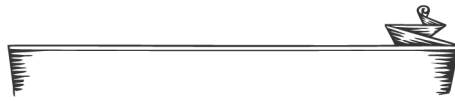
Also, there were a lot more mice than before – scads of them, crawling in and under and around each other. And they were the size of big, old dogs and a few were even as big as pigs! Great big mice lounged in the shade and dug in the dirt, and giant mice scrounged in trees for something to eat.

And the Mouse Queen knew that Someday had come!

“To the Land of Sweets!” she cried.

“To the Land of Sweets!” they all replied.

This started a giant stampede in all directions, until the Mouse Queen whistled through her two fingers and called them all back. Confused and bruised from bumping into each other, the giant mice limped back to the Mouse Queen. She lifted the Nut, Krakatuk, into the air and with a giant sweep of her arm, led them over the hill, toward the Land of Sweets.



CHAPTER 7

Sweet Thoughts of Revenge



All the way to the Land of Sweets, the Mouse Queen had one thought and one thought only, “Pay the piper – that’s what I’m gonna do – I’m gonna pay the piper!”

Of course, you and I know the Mouse Queen didn’t mean she was going to whip out her pocketbook and write Drosselmeir a check. Oh, no. When a Mouse Queen like our Mouse Queen talks about paying the piper, you can bet her thoughts will soon turn to ‘how’ to pay the piper.

And they did.

Being a mouse, the Mouse Queen's first thoughts were of getting rid of Drosselmeir and eating everything in the Land of Sweets to her heart's content. And as she thought, she began to hum a marching cadence: "As the Chief Gourmand, I'll soon command, all in the land, to feed me on the throne! As their one and only gastronome, I'll need no human chaperone. So, *he* can leave his happy home, and *he* can be the one to roam, as I enjoy my lunch alone! It's all for me, and me alone. Autonomy, for gastronomy! As Queen Cuisine – I'll rule supreme!"

For the longest time, visions of sugarplums danced in her head and she hoped they would soon drop into her open jaws. Then the Mouse Queen thought, "Kicking *him* out is not enough. I want to make him *pay*." And so, the Mouse Queen quickly went from happy dreams of overeating, to a black funk.

And she wasn't the only one plotting revenge and in a black funk. Someone else had even sweeter thoughts of revenge.

We've not talked about young Prince Reginald Rhatt for a long, long time – not since his unfortunate experience at the top of the Krakatuk tree. Well, we should.

For, after picking the Magic Nut, this whiny little mouse had become the royal favorite son of the Mouse Queen and a royal pain in the tail-region for all the other mice. And unfortunately for him, even though he, too, had grown larger, so had all the other mice. But still, he remained much smaller than the long-limbed meeslings around him.

He'd taken to wearing high-heeled boots and tall hats to overcome his lack of stature. Unfortunately for him, his costume of choice had only led to the other mice calling him, "Prince Runty Rat."

Mice can be so mean.

But Prince Reggie would show them. Mummy loved him best! So they could go eat dirt! And when they finally arrived in the lovely Land of Sweets – everywhere you looked – sweets! He would show them who was boss. Mummy was on his side and Reggie planned on doing anything and everything to keep it that way.

After all, the crown had to fall somewhere when the old biddie kicked the bucket, and Reggie was going to make good and sure it fell on his head.



CHAPTER 8

What Coffee Saw



After the bad morning with the Princess, Coffee drank the entire pot of snubbed coffee and was, by now, bouncing off the walls from too much caffeine. Mother Ginger booted her out of the castle in a friendly sort of, “A little fresh air and exercise will do you good,” sort of way.

So off Coffee went, to the hills. She was so jived, she felt she could run up to the mountains beyond, as well. But by the time she had jittered and jumped up the second hill, Coffee was panting for breath and stopped at an outcropping of rock. But the caffeine wouldn't let her

stand still and she couldn't even think of running any more. But move she must, so up she went, scaling the rocks. At the top, Coffee did a little victory dance and spun around to look across the Land of Sweets to the borders beyond.

At about her third or fourth spin, Coffee realized that a horde of invading mice was flashing before her eyes! Giant mice! And they had gnawed away the gates at the border and were all scrambling through to the Land of Sweets.

And that's when Coffee came crashing down from her caffeine high. She felt like each of her arms had pulled all the salt water taffy in the world and that her legs were slogging through melted caramel and each foot must be tugged from the sticky mass, before she could take the next step!

And for every step Coffee took, the mice took three.

When Coffee finally stumbled into the courtyard, she was so out of breath all she could do was wheeze, "Meeeee! Meeeeeeeeeeeeee! Meeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" in increasingly desperate tones.

Mother Ginger, thinking Coffee had swallowed a sugar plum whole and might be choking, slapped her robustly on the back, loosening several teeth and further knocking the wind out of the poor thing.

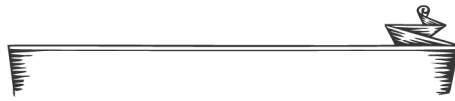
Tears streaming down her face, Coffee gestured wildly at the castle walls. Mice were everywhere! There were mice running up the drawbridge. There were mice running down the drawbridge, and up the walls and along the parapets and over the roof! The bells in the watchtower, which the Sweeties never manned, began a wild and crazy ringing – as mice flooded through the arches and under the bells.

With sudden comprehension, Mother Ginger cried, "Crisis! Mices!" But it was too late. Mice were everywhere! The Sweeties who could, fled through the open gates and into the countryside. Mother Ginger swept the remaining Sweeties into the castle. And in an instant, Franz raced from the clock to the throne room, and slammed the doors shut.

And from inside the castle walls, the Sweeties waited. They could hear mice munching and crunching and eating them out of house and home. But no mouse chewed through the drawbrige, no rodent crunched down the doors. What was happening out there?

In the meantime, Franz was wading manfully through Princess Pirlipat's total lack of concern. In response to her kingdom being overrun by mice, Pirlipat was worried about her petticoats, and without looking up from her mirror, airily suggested to Franz that he get cats, or set traps, so the mice wouldn't eat her finery.

Leaving the Princess as a hopeless case, a lost cause, and a bit of fluff when a strong ruler was needed, Franz raced to the window, hoping to call on Drosselmeir for help. But the call for help died on his lips as he saw Drosselmeir's tower covered with mice bigger than any mice he had ever seen, or dreamed of before.



CHAPTER 9

Paying the Piper



At the foot of Drosselmeir's tower, the Mouse Queen once again climbed up a mouse-made snout-and-whiskers ladder, this time with Prince Reggie tagging along behind. He made sure to step extra hard on the noses of those who'd called him "Prince Runty Rhatt."

At the top, the Mouse Queen squinted down her long pointy nose through the windows. Inside, Drosselmeir was mumbling and flipping pages and occasionally consulting a huge chart of a giant nut.

The Mouse Queen pretended to be amazed, "Would you look at that – studying and searching, all this time – for what I've got!" She looked at her Magic Nut, Krakatuk with fresh appreciation.

Knocking on the window, the Mouse Queen said in a sweet voice and with a wicked smile, “Are you looking for this, Drossie dear?” And she held up her scepter, with Krakatuk strapped to the tip. She banged on the window and it turned to ice, shattered, and pelted Drosselmeir with little balls of hail.

Drosselmeir looked up, but you couldn’t tell from his face that his heart was falling faster than the window had shattered. This drove the Mouse Queen mad. “I have your Nut, your precious Krakatuk, and I’m going to make you pay!”

But Drosselmeir paid the Queen no never mind. He seemed lost in his thoughts – and what he was thinking was to stay far away from the Nut that was in the hands of the Mouse Queen.

Prince Reggie peered out from behind his mummy’s robes. But all he could see was Drosselmeir’s still, still hand. Or was it? Reggie had to blink twice. The hand had been on Drosselmeir’s knee, but there it was on the table. How’d it get there? Reggie hadn’t seen it move, but move it did. Watching really hard, Reggie still missed the hand make another move, this time to a pile of books. What was the old man after?

And then Reggie saw it – the pipe! That nasty noisemaker that had driven them out of Hamelin in the first place! Reggie saw red and black and a flash of white – and the next thing he knew he was inside the tower, standing on Drosselmeir’s table. He almost peed his pants!

What was he doing here? Now Reggie was too scared to move! All Reggie could do was whimper, “Mummy, Mummy,” and hardly that because he could barely breathe. And at that moment, Reggie realized he was holding – the pipe!

The Mouse Queen was ecstatic. “Oh, my dear, dear boy! Run!”

Just as Drosselmeir lunged, Reggie fell back in alarm, and he scrambled and backpedaled all the way back to the window, and out of Drosselmeir’s reach. While Drosselmeir screeched to a stop, just out of the Mouse Queen’s reach.

Mummy couldn't stop praising Reggie. She cooed him (Reggie) and booed *him* (Drosselmeir) and made such a fuss.

Reggie – after double-checking that Drosselmeir really wasn't coming any further, and after being reassured that he was on a very safe perch – still kept a careful eye to make sure that Drosselmeir didn't move. Only then did he begin to strut like a miniature of his mummy. Reggie taunted the old man, as he twirled and whirled like a drum major with his baton. "To please her, you geezer, I'd tweezer your sneezer. This seizure, you see sir, for me sir, is only – a teaser!"

And so, it was a huge shock to Reggie when the Mouse Queen knocked him over with a swipe of her hand. "That's quite enough, you little cock-crow!" Then she patted his head, for she really was a little proud and very surprised that little Reggie had done such a rash act.

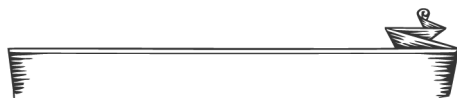
The Mouse Queen smiled at Drosselmeir, and taking up Reggie's rhyme, sang, "No need here, for a rest or a breather. I'm eager to see you're now so much meeker. A weeper, a griever, and the receiver. A pleader, a squeaker, and me the Grim Reaper!"

And then the Mouse Queen struck the tower with Krakatuk, that mighty Nut, and snow began to fall. It built up on the windows so quick and so thick that Drosselmeir was locked up inside.

Turning to the sniveling Mouse Prince, the Mouse Queen snarled, "Quit sniveling, you mangy mouse! Do you want to meet your future bride with a snotty nose?"

And much to the dismay of the living ladder, the Mouse Queen stamped and stomped all the way back down. She left behind the blubbering Reggie, who was wiping his eyes and blowing his nose, so he could follow after. But as soon as the Mouse Queen was back on land and just as Reggie started down, the meeslings whose noses were still smarting from his pointy boots, pulled away and broke apart – leaving Reggie in mid-air with no ladder below.

The meeslings all thought the bump on the butt that Reggie got at the bottom of the tower was just what he deserved for being such a bully, on the way up.



CHAPTER 10

Bravery and Betrayal



Franz was dismayed after the horde of mice abandoned Drosselmeir's tower, for he saw the tower covered in drifts of snow. A chill wind blew down his neck as Franz ran down the stairs to the gates. He knew he must protect the Sweeties – but how?

Franz grabbed a spear from a sugary suit of armor at the foot of the stairs. As the first wave of mice gnawed and chewed their way through the doors, Franz held them back by brandishing the sharp tip in front of their noses. But the sheer mass of mice pushed him up the castle stairs, step-by-step, slower and slower, until the mice stopped. That spear looked mighty sharp and they weren't about to risk a bloody nose. So, there they stood, balancing unevenly, halfway up the stairs, with Franz pointing the spear at their snouts.

Franz, seeing the mice afraid, jabbed his spear at the mouse highest on the steps. The mouse sprang back in fear, tripped on the mouse behind him and fifteen mice dominoed down the stairs. Franz followed up his advantage with a crazy shout and rushed down the stairs with his spear in front of him.

Just then, the Mouse Queen stepped through the doors, smacking her lips after eating her first sugar plum and ready for more. She was not happy to see mice stampeding down the stairs, and she was even more unhappy when they crashed into her. Mice were a dozen deep between Franz and the Mouse Queen. But she plowed her way through

the mice. Then calmly snapped off the tip of Franz's spear and ate it! Franz stood speechless – he had totally forgotten that everything in the Land of Sweets was made of sugar!

With a roar, the Mouse Queen kicked loose of all the meeslings around her. Franz was so shocked, he grabbed the nearest candied sword and swung it at the Mouse Queen. It broke into a hundred pieces and for a mad moment, the Mouse Queen was stopped, as her own mice scrambled for the bits of candy around her feet. In desperation, Franz pulled a mace off the wall. As the Mouse Queen finally pushed her way through the forest of tails from downward dipping mice, Franz yelled, “*En garde!*” and swung the mace like a baseball bat and hit the Mouse Queen full force.

Unfortunately for Franz, the mace was made of the same stuff as gumdrops. It bounced off the Mouse Queen so hard that it first jerked Franz's hands back, and then the rest of him, so that he flew across the room and landed on a marshmallow sofa, which fortunately for him, broke his fall and gave him a soft place to land.

Before Franz could leap up, the Mouse Queen and her meeslings rushed up the stairs and into the throne room.

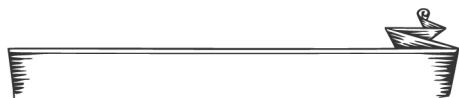
The Sweeties ran for their lives. What appeared to be a million mice burst into the throne room. Mother Ginger hid under her skirts the Teas and Gingerbread men and any other Sweetie who'd fit. Then she backed up to an open window. And while the meeslings grimaced and growled, she used her voluminous (which means really, really big) skirts to hide the fact that Sweeties of all shapes and sizes were sneaking out the window, sliding down the roof tiles, plopping softly onto Herr Cotton's stack of cotton candy, tumbling to their feet, and high-tailing it out of town!

Meanwhile, the Mouse Queen and her sniveling son, Prince Reginald Rhatt, surrounded Princess Pirlipat, who had hopped onto a chair and was holding up her skirts screaming, “Mice! Mice!”

This had the unpleasant effect of bringing the Princess eyeball-to-eyeball with the Mouse Queen, which caused Pirlipat to lose her balance and windmill backwards off her chair. Being the hero that he really, truly was, Franz arrived in the nick of time to save the Princess from falling flat on her caboose and bruising her dignity at the same time.

Franz broke the Princess's fall and untangled himself from, first her clinging arms, and then her voluminous skirts. (What can I say? Everyone wore really, really, big skirts back then!) He jumped onto the chair and cried, "Unhand the Princess!" like the good guy he was, even though the Princess was nothing more than a pain in the – well, you know. Before anyone could react, Princess Pirlipat pulled him up to his feet and hurried him across the room.

Surprisingly, the Mouse Queen didn't follow them. Instead, she smiled. And, oh, how Franz hated that smile.



CHAPTER 11

And More Betrayal



Franz was worried about the Mouse Queen's next move, while also trying to breathe, as Princess Pirlipat held him in a stranglehold. But the Princess wouldn't let go, so he was unable to hand her off to Mother Ginger and see her out the window, much to his disappointment.

Then the Mouse Queen made her move and thrust a rather frightened Prince Reginald Rhatt before them.

And then ever so softly, the Mouse Queen began to chant. And soon, the chant was picked up by all the meeslings, as they all joined in. Finally Reggie joined in, as he gained courage when the forces grew against Franz. The chant went something like this, "You must marry. Do not tarry. I need your throne. Your crown."

"Oh, no!" Pirlipat cried, wrapping herself around Franz like a choke vine on an oak. "Never! Never ever, could I marry a mouse!"

But the chanting began again, "You must marry! You must marry!" And the chanting went on, and on, and on, until you thought the Princess would give in, just to stop the squeaky, scratchy sound.

Suddenly, Franz spied a golden nut tied on top of the Mouse Queen's scepter. It had to be the Magic Nut that Uncle Drosselmeir sought!

And suddenly, many things happened at once.

Putting her hands over her ears, Princess Pirlipat let go of Franz and screamed, “Stop! Stop it! I’ll do anything if you just stop!”

Franz sprang across the room, onto the chair and clamped his mighty jaws over Krakatuk, chomping down with every last ounce of his strength. But the Nut was too big and too hard and his teeth slipped off and onto the rod of the scepter.

Drosselmeir dashed into the room to save Franz. Too late, he was too late.

The Mouse Queen slammed her scepter down hard on the floor with Franz still hanging on! A loud bang, a flashing light – followed by a cloud of smoke!

As the smoke cleared, a toy Nutcracker rolled to the feet of Princess Pirlipat. For a moment, silence ruled supreme.



Everyone was in shock. Drosselmeir because Franz had NOT been able to crack the Nut. The Mouse Queen because she had turned Franz into a Nutcracker. Princess Pirlipat because the boy she adored was now an ugly toy.

And we assume, Franz, because he was no longer flesh and blood, but rather wood and paint.

Then the Mouse Queen smiled as she looked at Krakatuk glowing at the end of her scepter, and she lifted the Nut high in the air, as she marched across the floor to smash the Nutcracker (who was really Franz) to bits.

Drosselmeir was running at top speed across the room as he called desperately to Princess Pirlipat, "Save him! Save him!"

But the cowardly Pirlipat only tried desperately to free herself from the Nutcracker, who had become tangled in the lace of her voluminous skirts. (Which I think is one reason no one wears those really, really, big skirts anymore!).

As the Mouse Queen stalked across the parquet floor, Pirlipat cringed and cried out, "I can do nothing to stop the Krakatuk." She kicked the Nutcracker away, and fell down before the Mouse Queen. "I promise to serve and obey the Krakatuk!"

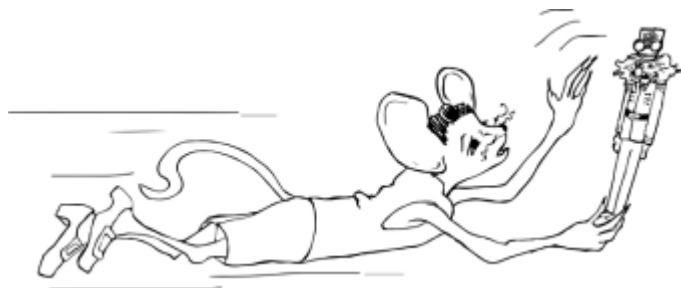
And so, Princess Pirlipat, sovereign of the Land of Sweets, betrayed Franz and the Sweeties. Seeing this, Mother Ginger, who had refused to flee with the rest of the Sweeties, sighed in great disappointment before she slipped out the window and slammed shut the casements on the paws of any mouse who tried to follow.

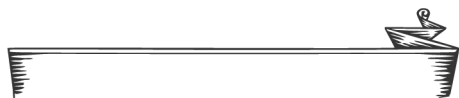
The Mouse Queen smiled again. Princess Pirlipat, who was groveling at her feet, looked up and saw that smile and realized a second too late that she hated the sight, because at that very second the Mouse Queen popped Princess Pirlipat on the nose and turned her into a frightful troll!

And while the Mouse Queen was busy cursing the princess, Drosselmeir went after the Nutcracker. He tripped Reggie before Reggie had a chance to scoop up the Nutcracker and win more brownie points from Mummy dearest.

Then Drosselmeir grabbed the toy wooden form of his nephew and plucked his magical pipe from Reggie's paws. When the clock began to

chime for the first time in years, Drosselmeir dodged his way through a multitude of mice, sprang into the clock, and disappeared.





CHAPTER 12

The Long Way Home



Even though Drosselmeir was running at top speed, he felt he was going nowhere fast. It was exceedingly dark inside the clock and he didn't remember it being so deep. But, he thought with a sigh, "That's how things are when you're running for your life. Everything happens in slow motion." And Drosselmeir felt sure that he was running for his life, and was absolutely sure he was running for poor Franz's life, as well.


Now, have you ever noticed that when you're trying your hardest to fix what you've done wrong, make up for a mean moment, or whatever it was that you screwed up, your brain goes into overdrive? And there you are, trying to think straight on how best to make amends – and all that comes into your mind is how you've made a mess of things?

Well, that happens to adults, too. And at that moment, even as Drosselmeir was running, scared stiff that he'd feel Krakatuk crack him on the noggin and he'd turn into a – what would a clock-making magician turn into? A top hat and white rabbit? A wand and gloves? Even while he was running away and trying to think how to save Franz, Drosselmeir was thinking how he deserved to be punished, horse-whipped, strung-up, and other nasty ideas. Because, after all, he thought, if he hadn't set Franz to cracking nuts, if he'd only sent him back, or better yet never brought him ... and on and on ... he must

be the worst uncle in the world. And Clara! What would Clara say? “Clara,” he thought, “Clara can help. I must find Clara! Clara! Clara!”


And as if he had been running around in circles lost in the blackness of his own thoughts, Drosselmeir suddenly saw the door to the Stahlbaum’s side of the clock. When he sprang through the clock door, onto the landing at the Stahlbaum home, Drosselmeir felt hope begin to grow. If he could only get the Nutcracker to Clara, surely her love could help poor Franz.

Turning back to the large grandfather clock, Drosselmeir turned the key and locked the door, then quickly rushed down the stairs in search of Clara.



CHAPTER 13

When Things Go Wrong



Sometimes when things go wrong, we try to pretend that everything's all right and maybe even that we planned it that way. Well, that's exactly what little Reggie did at that moment, because instead of scoring the Nutcracker, he was empty-handed and looking at the inside of an empty clock. So even though Reggie wished he could disappear too, and even though at that very moment, he wanted to never, ever see his mother again – he turned around to face the growling, grumbling, glowering grimace of his mummy.

To put a good face on the very obvious fact that he did not, indeed, have the Nutcracker anymore, Reggie brushed his paws, first against each other and then on his legs, as if getting rid of something unpleasant.

“There,” he said in what he hoped was an obvious gloat, “I’ve gotten rid of both nephew and uncle in one fell swoop.”

Reggie was a little – actually, a lot – intimidated when the Mouse Queen bent over and stuck her snout in his face and very sweetly asked, “And where did you send them, Reggie dear?”

Reggie was not fooled by the tone of her voice. He could see that she was tapping the long staff of her scepter on the stone floor, and with every tap, a puff of dark and ominous fog burst from the Nut, until he could barely see the Mouse Queen’s head from the dark cloud, forming around it.

“I – I sent them back,” Reggie stammered.

At that, a heavy snow began to fall from the cloud. The Mouse Queen tapped her pointy claw on Reggie’s pointy chest. Reggie had to keep stepping back because it hurt – just a little, but enough to scare him.

“So, you sent them back?”

“That’s right, I did.”

“Back, where?”

Reggie knew he was in a pickle, which leads me to digress because I really don’t know what being “in a pickle” means. Oh, I know we use it to say we’re in trouble, and Reggie was in trouble, that’s for sure. But really, what does “in a pickle” mean? Are we stuck inside a slimy, salty green lump of what used to be a cucumber? If you ever find out – please let me know, ‘cause not knowing has *me* in a pickle.

Anyway, Reggie said the first thing that popped into his mind, as we so often do when we’re in a pickle. And that is the worst thing you can do, for there’s no straight thinking when you are in that state.

"I sent them back home," came his answer, so under his breath that it got lost in the ruffles of his shirt.

"Where?"

"Home?" the answer slid back down Reggie's throat.

"Once again, louder."

"Home, I sent them home!" This time it came out as a squeak.

With that, the Mouse Queen grabbed Reggie by the scruff of his embroidered and emblazoned coat and frog-marched him to the clock. (Which leads me to another word question. Do frogs really march?) She thrust Reggie inside, after about the third or fifth attempt, for Reggie really did not want to go inside that very dark, very scary clock. And he clung and clawed and stiffened and balked in various fashions before the Queen Mother pried loose his claws from the sides of the door and used her size eleven feet to kick him through the opening, and into the black interior.

Slamming the door shut, she cried after her sniveling,

snotty son, "Since *you* sent them home, then *you* can go after them!"

But Reggie took one look at the dark corridor in front of him, turned tail and slammed against the door of the clock, so hard that, even with the Mouse Queen pushing against it from her side, Reggie could open the door just enough to stick out his pointy little nose.

"But, Mummy, why do you want them back? Aren't you glad they're gone?"

The Mouse Queen whipped open the door so fast, that Reggie fell out on his nose. And three mice that had been standing close by were knocked across the room and into the princess-turned-troll. This caused a moment of confusion, as the princess was still scared of mice and tried to jump back up on her chair. But now, since she was a troll, the chair promptly broke, plopping poor Pirlipat back into the middle of the mice – who, in turn, were scared of trolls in general, and of trolls

close-by even more. And they kept bumping into each other as they tried to get out of Pirlipat's way.

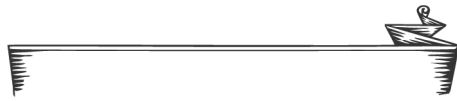
The Mouse Queen threw an angry look over her shoulder, and everyone froze, until her red eyes turned back on poor Reggie. She pulled him up by his ruffles. "I'm sending you after them because that boy is a Nutcracker and I don't like Nutcrackers – do you understand?" Reggie nodded his head. "Do you know why I don't like Nutcrackers?"

Reggie looked at the magic nut, Krakatuk, and nodded his head again. "Because Nutcrackers crack Nuts."

The Mouse Queen stroked Krakatuk and gave it the kiss she never gave her own son. "Then you know why you must go and destroy that boy?"

This time a very large tear rolled down Reggie's nose until it quivered on the very pointiest point of his pointy nose. When he nodded again, the tear fell onto his shirt and made a dark wet star.

"Good," the Mouse Queen said, and she patted Reggie's head before kicking him back into the clock. "Now destroy that Nutcracker!"



CHAPTER 14

Through the Clock Slowly



Runty Reggie Rhatt followed his snotty, dripping nose through the pitch black of the clock's interior. The darker it got, the slower he went, until at last, little Reggie stood stock-still. He tried to move his foot – but it wouldn't budge. With both hands, he grabbed his leg – but it was too heavy to lift. He grabbed the sides of the clock walls and tried to push himself forward – but he couldn't move. Reggie stood so

long in one spot with his nose continuing to drip and snot pooling in front of him, that when at last he gained the courage – or grew so afraid that Momma would come after him – that out of pure desperation, he leaped forward! He hit that snot spot with both feet – hard!

Off Reggie shot! Sliding on the snot-slicked floor, down the tunnel and toward a bright light! Reggie back-peddled and clawed the sides of the clock, but nothing he did slowed him down. In fact, Reggie thought he was gaining speed! Until – SPLAT! He pancaked into the door of the Stahlbaum grandfather clock – which was locked, of course.

For an entire minute (which felt like hours), Reggie stayed stuck against the door, his snout crumpled and creased tight up against the clock face. And while he stayed plastered as he was, he could see the second hand spinning round like a set of whiskers gone wild. And beyond the second hand, Reggie could see into the Stahlbaum house.

Somewhere in Reggie's feeble brain, a memory clicked into place. He used to eat here! Just down the stairs, there was food! The thought revived Reggie and he pushed back with a primo 'plop!' and pulled himself free from the clock's door.

Peeking carefully through the face of the clock, Reggie looked about for Drosselmeir, but he was too short to see really clearly. Pretty much all he could see were the stairs leading up to the attic, and below him, the ceiling of the grand ballroom. Mustering every ounce of courage down to the very tip of his tail, he turned the handle of the clock door. Nothing. He turned again. Stuck? With growing impatience, as he thought of Mother Stahlbaum's wonderful pecan pies, Reggie grabbed the knob with both paws and shook hard. It wouldn't turn!

Outraged that he couldn't get at the hot cross buns he was sure he could smell fresh from the oven, Reggie planted both of his hind feet on the door frame, grabbed the bars of the door and put his back into it – giving the door a tremendous shaking – which scared a passing maid

so much, she dropped the flowers she was carrying to Mrs. Stahlbaum for Clara's hair and stood there, staring at the clock with eyes as big as goose eggs.



A sharp word from Clara's room – and the maid grabbed the flowers and hightailed it past the bumpy, thumpy door. When the maid returned from Clara's room with a petticoat to press, she flattened herself against the wall opposite the clock and scooted past as fast as she could.

Back inside the clock, Reggie was weeping once more.

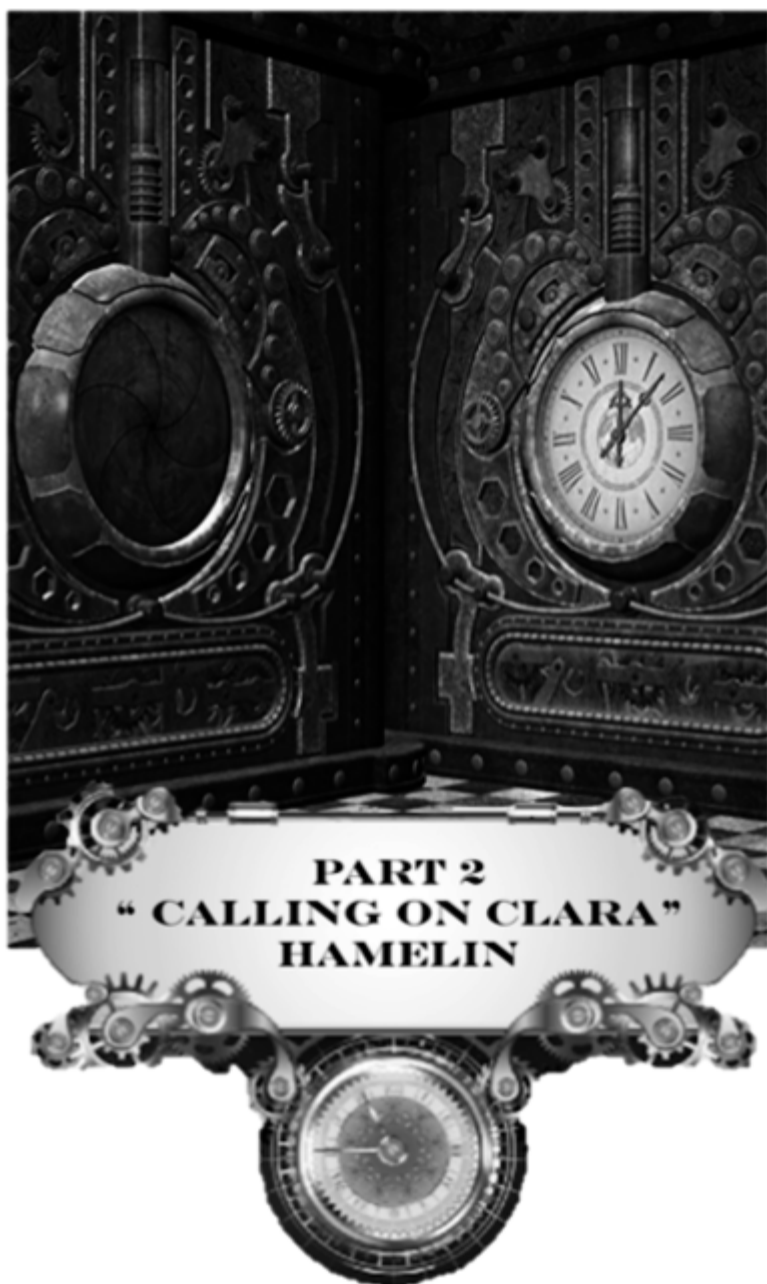
He had broken a claw on his paw. And he couldn't open the door. And Mummy was going to kill him. And he wished he'd never been born.

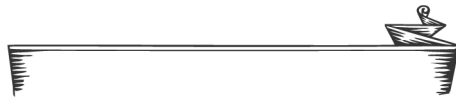
But as it is with all of us when we get into this state of self-misery and pity and pouting, the sad fact remains that we were born. And the only thing left to do – is to get on with whatever it is that we must get on with.

And so it was with Reggie. He knew he couldn't open the door. He'd tried with all his strength – hadn't he? He'd have to go back to Mummy and ask for help – wouldn't he? She was sure to understand after he told her how he had worked and worked to open the door –

wouldn't she? Surely, when he showed her his broken claw, she'd see that he had done his best and she'd come help – wouldn't she?

Not sure of any of the answers, but afraid the answer was 'NO' to all of them, Reggie turned tail and headed back into the darkness to the Land of Sweets ... and his mummy.





CHAPTER 15

Time and Again



Now, we've been hearing the name of Clara off and on, but we've never actually met Clara. She's like one of those people everyone talks about, but no one really knows. Fortunately, we're at that place in our story where we are at the Stahlbaum house, which actually, is a rather grand, old-fashioned house. It's old-fashioned because our story takes place several centuries ago. Did I forget to tell you this? Well, in the Land of Sweets time is really not important, and even though there is a clock, it is broken and probably wouldn't work anyway, because the

Land of Sweets is a land where time is forgotten, ignored and generally of no use at all.

But in Clara's house – which happens to be in a small hamlet in the mountains on the German-Dutch border – time ruled supreme. From the moment she was born, the time duly noted on both her birth certificate and in the family records, the clock governed her life. As an infant, feedings were exactly every three hours, and nap and bedtimes precisely enforced. As a child, there was no lying abed. Even on Saturday mornings, she must be up, dressed, with fingernails clean and ears washed, in time to be presented to her father before he was off to his clinic.

Almost every moment of every day was regimented by the clock, which was quite hard for a girl who loved to read and loved to tinker – for these things take time and make you lose track of time.

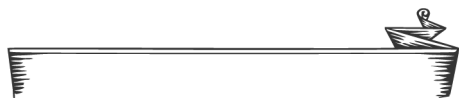
So, before she lost him due to a broken clock, Clara's growing fondness for Franz was both *ironic* – because he was a clockmaker's apprentice, which meant he and Drosselmeir were the ones who kept the myriad (that means bunches and bunches) of clocks running and ruling Clara's life – and *natural*, because they shared a love of disassembling one thing or another, be it a music box, or a kaleidoscope, or Clara's favorite “take-apart-and-end-up-with-more-pieces” than when you started on them clocks! She was perpetually trying to stop time.

Now, I don't know if she did this on purpose.

Oh, let's be honest – Clara was a regular clock assassin. No clock was safe if she could figure out how to open the back and get to its innards. Those who knew her – which did *not* include her parents – wondered if she was trying to find time for her reading, or create reasons for visits from Drosselmeir, and, more importantly, Franz.

Drosselmeir, before he was stuck in the Land of Sweets, had sympathized with Clara and never let on that there was a time-saboteur in the Stahlbaum household, taking all the blame on himself when he was accused of shoddy workmanship.

Clara's mother thought Drosselmeir made extremely inferior time-pieces. And if there had been another clockmaker in town, or if the roads to their hamlet had been any less steep, Mother Stahlbaum would have imported from Switzerland the giant grandfather clock that dominated the grand staircase landing. Instead, she had commissioned Drosselmeir to both get rid of her mice *and* build the clock, which is really why we have this story at all.



CHAPTER 16

Hustle, Bustle, Toil and Trouble



Mrs. Stahlbaum was in an uproar – and whenever Mrs. Stahlbaum was in an uproar, the whole house echoed her uproar. For a week, the chaos had been growing and growing, until today. Everywhere one looked, there was a hustle and a bustle. The reason for all the trouble was simple, but sixteen years in the making. Ever since Clara was born, in fact.

For on the day of Clara's birth, Mrs. Stahlbaum had looked down on her wee infant girl and made PLANS. Plans to marry her off and be rid of her, that is. It's really not quite as heartless as it sounds. Mrs. Stahlbaum dreamed grand visions of marrying her only daughter off to a handsome prince – correction: a rich and handsome prince – clarification: an exceedingly rich and handsome prince.

The thought of her daughter married to – final clarification: an exceedingly rich and *generous*, handsome prince – made Mrs. Stahlbaum even more exceedingly happy. For years she had dreamed this dream, planned for this day, and had never given one thought as to whether it was Clara's dream or would make Clara happy. After all, Mrs. Stahlbaum was the mother and in Mrs. Stahlbaum's estimation, mothers only want the best for their children. And in Mrs. Stahlbaum's opinion – an exceedingly rich and *generous*, handsome prince was certainly the best for her daughter ... and herself, of course.

And today was the day that this dream would come true – or at least, kick start Mother Stahlbaum’s plan into action. It was Clara’s coming-out party.

And Mother Stahlbaum was in an uproar because after all her years of toil and planning, Clara was giving her trouble.

Clara’s opinion, having never been asked nor considered, had been growing by leaps and bounds ever since preparations for her coming-out party had started six months ago. In fact, Clara had never even dreamed of a prince – rich, young, or handsome. She was very happy, thank you very much, with the idea of tinkering around in the book-lined attic workshop with a certain apprentice (whom we know as Franz) for the rest of her life.



Last year, after Franz disappeared with Drosselmeir and all the mice and children into the grandfather clock, Clara spent the following day waiting for their return. After two days, she began to miss Franz horribly. After three days, she grew anxious and found moments to sneak up to the clock to peek inside for signs of their return. By the end of that first week, Clara was certifiably Worried, with a capital W.

She had thought they would be gone for a couple hours, a day at the most, and here it was eight whole days, and no sign of return. And from her, now thorough, study of the clock's interior, there was no way for her to go find them. The inside of the clock was just – well – the inside of a clock. Solid walls. Nothing more.

The thing that was really bothering Clara was the tiny nut she had found. Not an eating type of nut, but a screwing-to-a-bolt type of nut. She was sure it had fallen from the mechanical workings of the grandfather clock. And – she was sure – that if she could only find from where it had fallen and fix that part of the clock – then the part of the clock that governed transport into magical lands, or wherever Drosselmeir had taken the mice, would work again and Franz would find his way back. And she wouldn't have to marry the really rich and exceedingly handsome, generous prince her mom had in mind.

Or so she hoped.

In fact, she'd decided she was mad at Franz. Running off like that and not even asking her to go. She had half a mind to not even fix the old clock. She would refuse to dress for this old party, refuse to come down and if it came to it, refuse to dance with any prince who dared come through her door. Not that she actually thought there'd be princes coming her way. The only men for miles worked in the mills or tended sheep. And the only reader in the bunch was Franz, and he had waltzed away from her without a backward glance, leaving her to be a cog in her mother's machinations.

She was right not to fix the clock, but then again, she did miss him.

After weeks of sneaking quick studies of the clock's interiors – and Clara did have to sneak, because Mother Stahlbaum had put a 'clock watch' on Clara after the day she had found her in deep concentration with pieces of the parlor clock scattered about her on the rug – she was no further along than when she had started.

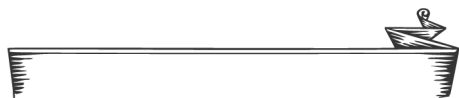
Since then, all the maids were quick to report any 'clock-y' tendencies that Clara might have had. And so, Clara was forced to run quick

forays inside the Grandfather's clock, while she hid from the maids as she searched for the loose bolt that was missing the tiny hexagonal nut she had found.

This seek-and-rescue mission of hers lasted such a very long time. In fact, it wasn't until the morning of her coming-out party that Clara finally found – in the pendulum of all places. A tiny loose lever! She pushed the flapping bolt in tight, pulled the nut from her apron pocket, and from the other pocket pulled out a wrench. She quickly tightened the nut and gave the pendulum a tiny push and it began to sway back and forth with an even and comforting tick-tock.

The sound of the kitchen door creaking open warned Clara to make her escape. Clara had surreptitiously (that is, without anyone seeing her) slipped a nail into the hinges of that very door only last week to give her some sort of maid-approach warning. So, she quickly backed out of the clock and slipped into her room.

"Now," thought Clara, "all I have to do is to stay away from anyone wearing a crown for the next twenty-four hours," because Clara was sure Franz would spring through that clock as soon as he saw it was working again. And if he didn't – well, she would have to see if there was any way she could go to him.



CHAPTER 17

What Mummy Did



Most mummies are very nice, but sad to say in our story, that is not the case, especially when we're talking about the Mouse Queen. I'm not sure if she really even qualifies as a mummy in the strict sense of the word. For when I think of a mummy, it's someone who loves her children and takes care of them and reads them bed-time stories and gives them good-night kisses and that sort of stuff. I'm pretty sure the Mouse Queen never did any of that for any of her children – especially poor Reggie.

So, Reggie was absolutely right to be scared as he opened the clock door and poked his head out. Fortunately for Reggie, the Mouse Queen had just downed her seventeenth sugarplum, and was on such a sugar high, that she actually greeted him with a bright smile – which normally was pretty scary, as it showed all her sharp teeth. But when those sharp teeth were dripping with the gooey remains of sugarplums – it was downright dreadful. Reggie was lucky he didn't fall over in a dead faint, at that very moment.

But, he didn't.

Instead, he squeaked out why he was back.

The Mouse Queen tossed him a taffy and laughed, "Is my sonny-bunny, mousey-wousey lost without his mummy?" Using her staff to help her up off the throne, for it seemed to Reggie that his mum had put on a few pounds since he'd left, and from the half-eaten platters of

candy surrounding the throne, he could see why she was having difficulty standing. Finally up, the Mouse Queen stuffed an assortment of fudges, caramels and peppermint sticks into the folds of her robe, before waddling over to the clock.

Reggie held his breath – would she whack him now? Nope. The Mouse Queen simply stepped into the clock and beamed, showing all her purple-y pink teeth again. “After you, Sonny, Mummy’s at your beck and call.”

To Reggie there was nothing more nerve-racking than that walk back to the clock door, with his mother – strung out on candy – behind him.

But he made it. There they were, standing in front of the locked door, with the Mouse Queen looking through the clock face, munching on a peppermint stick, while Reggie peeked past the swinging pendulum through the window in the gold-leaf decorated door. When Reggie felt a curious warm and wet sensation growing on the back of his neck, he rubbed his neck, and his paw came away sticky and red. “I’m bleeding!” he thought, glancing up at the Mouse Queen to see if she had bit him when he wasn’t looking.

And at that moment, another glob of peppermint and saliva dropped from the slack jaws of his mother. She was positively drooling as she looked outside the clock. “Its the Stahlbaum’s! How lucky for us. First the nephew, then his uncle. And now, finally, that old biddy who had Drosselmeir build the clock. You’ve got your work cut out for you, Sonny.”

“Me?” squealed Reggie.

Ignoring her son as she always did, the Mouse Queen opened the clock door, or tried to.

“I told you it was locked.”

Reggie got a little smack on his nose for that bit of lip. But for once it was playful, as the Mouse Queen was still sucking on her last peppermint.

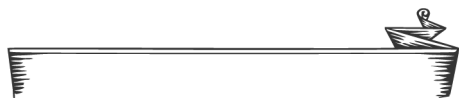
“Not to worry. There’s always someone out there foolish enough to open the door. Someone always ends up opening the door – and we mice, we just scoot right in like always. Now, won’t we?” The Mouse Queen was forgetting that she was now six-foot nine, and even Reggie was pushing four-foot high. But Reggie was wise enough to see that she was coming down off her sugar high, and he kept silent.

But he did scoot away a little, as the Mouse Queen watched the maids scurry back and forth with petticoats and gowns and hot curling irons and slippers. “No.... No. None of these will do. I need someone I can catch, control, and mold to my will.”

All the maids disappeared into Clara’s room. As they waited, the Mouse Queen began to mutter, and Reggie began to worry. He didn’t like being cooped up in this small space while his mother grew hungry for more candy. And there wasn’t much room, as he was sure she was still growing. Her buttons were tight and he was afraid one would burst at any moment and put out his eye. And then a very curious thing happened. It’s probably happened to you.

It’s when you know something is dangerous and you try to avoid it – like when you’re riding your bike or playing a video game – and dang if you don’t run smack dab into the very thing you’re avoiding. Well, Reggie was so afraid of the Mouse Queen’s buttons that instead of *not* looking at the buttons, or turning his head, or putting a hand up to protect his eyes – all he could do was stare. And sure enough, the very button he was staring at strained tighter and tighter until – pop! It flew off the round rump of the Mouse Queen’s robe and smacked poor Reggie right between the eyes!





CHAPTER 18

Never Take Candy from a Stranger



Reggie was hopping around, ow-ing and howling, when the Mouse Queen slapped a sticky paw over his snout and pointed out into the hall. Down the steps came three very stupid-looking boys.

Now, to be honest, I don't know if they were stupid or if it was the very silly blue-velvet shorts and jackets they were wearing. The big satin bows under their chins and the cereal-bowl haircuts didn't help much, either. These boys really did look stupid, and I'm so sorry to have to say something so mean, but you need to know these things. It's the sort of thing that you may think, but should never say, except for times like these when it's part of a story.

Anyway, what she saw made the Mouse Queen happy.

Clearing her throat and unintentionally causing the boys to jump back in alarm, the Mouse Queen sweetly called to them, "Boys? Oh, little boys? Could you help me please?" The fact that a voice was calling them out of a clock alarmed the boys even more. But each was so ashamed that the others had seen him jump away scared, that each one pretended to ignore the voice, like they would ignore any adult voice that called to them when the three of them ran in a pack.

The Mouse Queen swallowed her annoyance and called again. "Little boys! Little boys! I'm locked inside the clock and need your help."

This was funny. The boys howled with laughter and thumped each other's backs. How stupid could this adult be to get locked inside a

Grandfather Clock! When they had finally laughed themselves into tears and had to hold each other up and gasp, the Mouse Queen with growing impatience, that caused Reggie no end of alarm, called for what he knew was the last time, “Little boys? Little boys? Do you want some candy?”

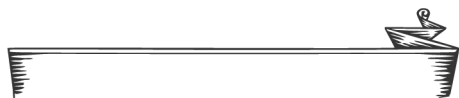
Now she had their attention, and the Mouse Queen could sense it! All she had to do was reel them in. “I’ve all sorts of freshly made fudge,” she said, even though she had eaten it all.

The boys, who had been wavering before, dropped all pretense of arrogance, and in a jumble of elbows, vied to be the first to open the door, in hopes of snatching the candy and wolfing down half of it, before being forced to share by whatever stupid adult was locked inside.

When the key was finally turned – for they fought for possession for a good two minutes – Reggie knew the temperature of the clock had gone up ten degrees, as the Mouse Queen grew even more angry and impatient. With a sense of dread, he knew she was coming down from her sugar high. He was very grateful that, for this very moment, she seemed to have forgotten his existence.

Like I said, when the key finally turned, the Mouse Queen pounced on the boys. And upon seeing a giant and very angry mouse, if they could have, they would have run down the stairs and hid under the sofa for the rest of the night. But they couldn’t, for the Mouse Queen had grabbed the bows of their blouses and held them like three dogs on three leashes.

All they could do was remember the warnings from their parents to *never* take candy from a stranger.



CHAPTER 19

A Party She Could Do Without



A funny thing can happen when you are the guest of honor for a really, really, big party. Everyone is running here and there, getting this or that, fixing one problem or another, greeting a new guest at every turn, and in general being so busy making the party work – that you're left feeling like you're on the outside, looking in.

Which was actually fine with Clara. As long as Mother Stahlbaum's attention was on taffeta petticoats, silk satin slippers, and a never-ending array of buttons and bows, Clara was left alone in her window seat. And even though the cold night air made the spot chilly, Clara preferred her quiet corner to the absolute mayhem and madness that filled her room.

There were no less than – count them – seven dresses! And each one was more complicated than the last. Mother Stahlbaum had brought in a French seamstress, who had trudged up the mountain pass, complaining bitterly about the cold, and how chilblains would keep her from ever holding a needle again.

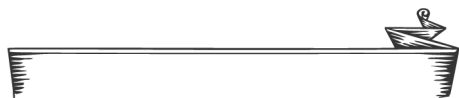
(Just what the heck are chilblains? Oh, yuck! Here's the definition: "Chilblains are a painful abnormal reaction of the small blood vessels in the skin when exposed to cold temperatures. The cold causes constriction of the small blood vessels in the skin, and if rewarming of the skin happens too rapidly, there is leakage of blood into the tissues." In other words, your fingers swell up; get hard and blue and sore and cracked all

over, while feeling like they're on fire. No wonder Mademoiselle Lesue was cranky!)

M. Lesue must have avoided the chilblains, because proof of her needle-wielding abilities claimed over three-fourths of Clara's room. And she was still stitching away in the corner, on what Clara feared was dress number eight.

A succession of maids carried in half a dozen curling irons of all shapes and sizes and stuck them over the fire to heat up (no electricity – remember?). Clara cringed, remembering other special occasions when her hair was curled and she had been singed, because the hot iron was held too close to her neck. In a final attempt to prevent the night from happening, Clara unhooked the ties of the drapes and pulled them shut, creating a little cocoon of silence on her window seat, between the drapes and the icy window.

With a sigh of relief, Clara leaned back against her pillows and pulled out a book by some inventor named Da Vinci, which had some great drawings of impossibly crazy contraptions, like a flying machine, that she was dying to figure out. However, before Clara could even open the book, the flicker of lights outside her window in the dark night caught her eye. It seemed to her that hundreds of lamps were coming down from the hills in all directions. She was mesmerized as the tiny dots grew and grew – until she realized that all the lamps were headed to her gate, and at the end of each lamp was a man, invited by her mother as a potential partner, *for life*, for none other than herself.



CHAPTER 20

Out of the Cold and into the Fire



The one thing you have to be careful about with chilblains is to never, ever – no matter how cold, you are – thrust your hands, feet, or whatever, into warm water. It's like slapping your hands into a board full of red hot needles and not being able to shake those needles off, even after you've pulled your hands, feet, or whatever, out of the water and are running around shaking your hands, feet, or whatever, and yelling at the top of your lungs.

That's exactly how Clara felt.

For no sooner, had she looked outside and grown cold with dread when she realized that there was no way of keeping this night (that she had tried to prevent from happening) from happening – than Mother Stahlbaum had ripped back the drapes. And half a dozen maids pulled Clara into a room grown much, much too hot from people, and hot water, and curling irons on the fire. If Clara had not been brought up so very carefully, she would have run around the room and yelled at the top of her lungs. As it was, she only fidgeted and bounced from foot to foot while her hair was crimped and curled, and layer upon layer of petticoat and slip and flounce and frippery was tied, trimmed and tightened over every inch of her needle-stung person.

It was all over in about an hour and forty-five minutes.

Mother Stahlbaum stepped back from her work to admire the entirely new girl left in Clara's place. As Clara looked into the mirror, she thought, "This certainly isn't me."

"Oh, my darling, darling, Marie!"

Mother Stahlbaum never called Clara by her middle name, Clara, which Clara much preferred over her stuffier first name of Marie. And that pretty much says it all about their relationship. Mother Stahlbaum only saw Clara as Marie, this primed and prissy missy, the vision of her own dreams of a perfect daughter. But Marie was pretty much a stranger to Clara, and as Clara looked into the mirror, she realized that she pretty much hated Marie.

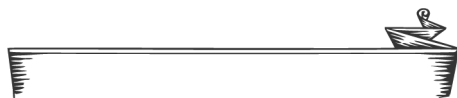
With much gushing and cooing over Marie, Mother Stahlbaum left with all the maids, to attempt a similar transformation on her own person – in other words, everybody left to try to squeeze Mother Stahlbaum into one of Mademoiselle Lesue's torture traps of a dress.

This was a relief to Clara – as it only left Marie for her to deal with – and since Clara had been dealing with Marie all her life, she knew what to do. First, off came every bow from the dress. Then all three petticoats were assigned to the bottom of her closet. Off came the corset waist and beading, until the dress was a splendidly simple version of before. Drawing her first full intake of air since she'd been dressed, Clara attacked the mountain of hair on top of her head, which threatened to topple her over. Pin after pin fell to the floor, pinging on the fireplace hearth and landing in the coals, each one heating up and glowing red, until the entire firebox floor was crisscrossed in red-hot x's of hairpins gone molten.

At last, Marie was banished from the room, and Clara stood studying her reflection in the mirror, where she was glad to see a pretty girl in a simple gown. Then she realized that she was still stinging, and the evening was just going to go from bad to worse. This thought was confirmed when the new silver bell her mother had installed for just this

night, rang, and rang, and rang again, as the bachelors arrived for her coming-out party.

If ever there was a time for Plan B, Clara knew it was now, but for the life of her she couldn't figure out what Plan B might be.



CHAPTER 21

An Invasion of a Different Sort



Mother Stahlbaum was ecstatic. The night she had orchestrated for years was finally here and her Marie was a vision! And, as she looked into the mirror, she felt that she, too, was a vision. She told M. Lesue that very thing.

A vision of WHAT, M. Lesue had no idea. In her opinion, the style Mother Stahlbaum had chosen for herself was better suited to a girl half – no – a third her age. But M. Lesue had been hired to sew, and sew she did. Despite her personal thoughts, M. Lesue was no dummy and with a flurry of French verbs, she proclaimed Mother Stahlbaum a rival to her very pretty daughter, Marie, that sweet, sweet child. Surely a credit to the mama! And before she could choke on her words, M. Lesue fled from the boudoir and down the hall.

She gazed out the casements to the fields below, where eligible young bachelors, of all sorts and sizes, fell upon the house like invaders on a castle. With an uncharacteristic demonstration of pity, M. Lesue returned to the child's room. (M. Lesue always thought of anyone less than forty as a child.) She was very pleased indeed to see Clara, and not Marie.

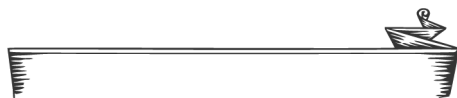
Clara, on the other hand, was standing in the middle of M. Lesue's destroyed handiwork, and she was horrified to see M. Lesue.

As M. Lesue looked at Clara's stricken face, she was very sorry indeed that nature had given her, Michele Lesue, such a black and sour

visage. Here she was, scaring the poor child! In her attempt to comfort Clara, M. Lesue did what she always did when confronted with a child she wanted to hug and hold and comfort, but had no right to do so. M. Lesue became officious. She bustled about, picking up corsets and bows and stuffing them into the wardrobe. She pulled down each of the seven dresses and flung them over her arms. In the act of trying to comfort Clara, M. Lesue completely and totally terrorized her.

When the room was cleared of all the fluffery, and, as M. Lesue headed to the door, a strangled croak from Clara stopped her exit. A quick peek down the hall, and then the little seamstress did something she had never dared to do before – she contradicted her patron and jeopardized her paycheck. All her desires for a child of her own came out in a succinct combined blessing and warning, “You have chosen to dress as who you are – may you be as wise in choosing your path in life. Be brave, *mon petit*, be brave. For you, there is still time.”

Before Clara could open her mouth, M. Lesue was gone.



CHAPTER 22

Disappointment Comes In All Shapes and Sizes



Clara was bucking herself up to implement the newly inspired Plan B – the “You can’t make me budge from my room!” type of plan. What? Are you criticizing her escape techniques? Are you any better? Ha! I know what you’re thinking. You’re lying there in the comfort of your bed, gloating because you know how disastrous playing the donkey can be.

Sigh. You’re right. Grown-ups always have a way of popping the protesting poppet from their hide-away – or worse yet, ignoring the self-proclaimed sit-in and letting their child molt and die of hunger, while they enjoy pizza and go out bowling. It’s one of those “can’t win no matter what you do” sort of plans.

But Clara didn’t know this yet. After all, she’d been the good child. Well, excepting the countless clocks that sat in all their un-working splendor around the Stahlbaum mansion. Or the pilfered pieces of whatever it might be that she and Franz had needed to build their latest contraption in the attic. No one, except Drosselmeir, knew she had a secret life, for she had found the best way to get what she wanted was to do what was asked – FAST! Then disappear until the next bell called her to the duty of the hour. In all her life, Clara had never chanced a direct confrontation with ANYONE in the household, least of all HER MOTHER.

And yet, here she was, on the eve of her mother's most important night of her life, getting ready to pull the always-doomed-from-the-start "you can't make me" card.

This is what happens when you choose the easy way out for most of your life. You end up stuck and forced to make a split-second decision that is almost always either really stupid or really, really stupid. Sigh. You've got to feel for the girl.

Just as Clara had come to what she thought was an inspired Plan B, Mother Stahlbaum swept into the room. Actually, it was more of a flood than a sweep. She stopped only for a moment when her hoops, petticoats and gathers constricted her at the doorway and slowed her down for a micro-moment – before they spring-released and snapped her into the room with a rush, which only added to her headlong surge. However, all the forward rush of silks and satins came to an abrupt halt – or at least Mother Stahlbaum came to an abrupt halt, for the silks and satins were still springing forward from the release at the door jam. This resulted in a fabric wave breaking over Mother Stahlbaum like the surf on a rock – with a froth of lace cascading up and around her, covering her hair, and her now-frowning face, with the whites of her petticoats, and then falling back down, just like the sea, proclaiming its fury.

When Mother Stahlbaum recovered from this mini-tsunami, and saw the hated Clara and not the beloved Marie she had left, she was immensely annoyed. This was an old battle fought between the two, but it wasn't the battle Mother Stahlbaum wanted to face tonight. No, what was important tonight was that her daughter, be it Clara or Marie, find a suitor. With that in mind, Mother Stahlbaum captured Clara's hand and dragged her out to her private balcony, where they could look below without anyone being able to see them, thus upsetting in one quick motion, Clara's Plan B.

Seeing Clara instead of Marie was only the first of the disappointments Mother Stahlbaum would face that night. As she surveyed the suitors in line to greet Father Stahlbaum, Mother Stahlbaum felt her

heart drop. Never in her life had she seen such a disappointing collection of men – young and old, tall and short – not a prince among them, and in fact, way too many frogs. In all her years of planning Clara's coming out party, Mother Stahlbaum had never once thought of who would actually show up. After all, there were no princes in the neighborhood – young, handsome, rich or generous.

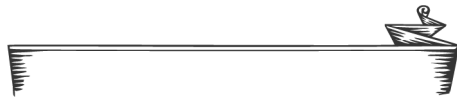
Clara, on the other hand, was overjoyed to see no princes. For she erroneously thought the sight of this extremely motley crew would put her mother's dreams at rest, and off Clara could go to the comfort of Leonardo and his flying machines. She hoped the night might be over before even starting, but what she didn't reckon was the chameleon character of her mother's determination.

Her mother's "Well, my dear, what do you think?" took Clara by complete surprise, so much so, that she told her mother just what she thought.

"I think I'd rather molder with the mice in the attic, than dance with any one of these so-called suitors, who are unwanted and unwelcome."

Disappointment is a weak word to explain what Clara felt when her mother replied, "Well, my dear, they're all we have."

Absolutely certain that Plan B must still be used, Clara turned heel and ran back into her room, wishing too late, that she hadn't used the key to the bedroom door for a lever in her last contraption. For here she was with no way to lock herself in her room, and realizing that Plan B would not suffice.



CHAPTER 23

Puppets on a String



While Mother Stahlbaum complained to Father Stahlbaum about the state of affairs, with the appearance of Clara and the banishment of Marie, the three boys, at about the same moment, were unlocking the Mouse Queen from the clock.

So, let's return to their petrified state of disbelief, horror, and full bladder, before they wet their pants. They suffered for less than a second before the Mouse Queen bopped all three with Krakatuk and turned them into her puppets – even though they still looked like boys.

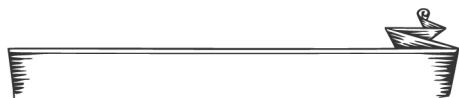
With a last swallow of peppermint, she shot them off, down the stairs and into the party below, to search for Drosselmeir. Their express orders? To find the Nutcracker and break it to bits!

Craving candy, depressed, and fed up with having to exert herself, the Mouse Queen turned all her annoyance on Reggie, who was hiding in the folds of her skirts. (Okay, okay – I guess voluminous skirts have ONE advantage – if you're not the one wearing them, that is!) Finally locating Reggie between her crinolines, the Mouse Queen grouched and grumbled enough to let Reggie know that he'd better NOT bother her again – unless he had destroyed the Nutcracker. With a swat on the back of his head for good measure, she turned tail (which mice can do because they have a tail) and barely squeezed through the clock's door, for she had gained a pound or two on the trip over.

Reggie stared down the stairs in horror and cringed, withdrawing even closer to the shadows of the clock. There were people everywhere! If he wasn't a mouse, Reggie would have jumped up on a chair and screamed like Princess Pirlipat.

As Reggie sat in his shadows, HE grumbled and grouched about the Mouse Queen bossing him around. Here he was, a Prince, and he was no more than a slave, a toy for her use, of no more importance to her than the boys who were, right now, nothing more than her puppets. "We're all her puppets," he sobbed, "and SHE's holding the strings." And once again, Reggie showed himself for who he truly was, for during his private pity party, his truly ratty soul came out – and he made plans on how to DO HER IN.

From getting rid of Mummy, Reggie progressed to being KING of the mice, and his next half hour was spent in happy contemplation of all the ways he would pay back his brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins for being mean to him.



CHAPTER 24

Boys Will be Boys – Or, How Drosselmeir Came Back into the Picture



“**B**oys being boys” were no more noticed at the party downstairs, than they ever were. The men either yelled for them to stop their mischief or complained about how they never acted that way when they were boys. The women cattily commented with a high-degree of self-righteousness about the Stahlbaums’ abysmally poor parenting skills. The girls simply fled in terror to somewhere safe. And then from that safe spot taunted the boys, hoping to goad them into committing some really rash act. Thus, giving the girls the pleasure of seeing the boys punished – and themselves held up for comparison as visions of sugar and spice and everything nice. Let’s face it – we humans are sometimes rotten to the core.

So, to most in the room, the party was just a typical party and the boys were just typical “boys being boys.”

However, Drosselmeir observed a very worrisome trend in their behavior. Not only were the boys running about bothering everyone and creating a great deal of noise and confusion, but also they were on a seek-and-destroy mission. First, they raided the curio cabinet and broke a couple of Clara’s dolls. Then, they paid an inordinate amount of attention to the refreshment table – especially the end with all the nuts. By the time they were through, nuts had been scattered from one end of the buffet to the other, causing the poor maid – who had been fright-

ened by mice in the clock upstairs – to react in horror when she saw the state of the table. Quickly cleaning up the mess, she checked under the table and in the corners for any signs of mice.

The boys had returned to the curio cabinet, and as the maid passed by, the cabinet gave a little jump – just like the clock upstairs. The poor maid fainted dead away, and had Drosselmeir not been as quick of foot as he was keen of eye, she would have fallen over into the punch bowl. He carried her downstairs to the kitchen and put her under the care of the housekeeper. By the time Drosselmeir returned, several of Mother Stahlbaum's wooden statues were in pieces near the fireplace, and the boys were making their way to the intricate carvings on the staircase – where he had hidden the Nutcracker.

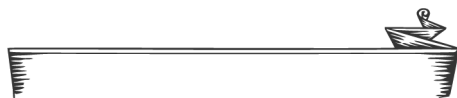
Still not sure of their intent – but fearing for Franz – Drosselmeir quickly strode across the room on his long, long legs. And just as the boys spied the Nutcracker amidst the carvings of trees and nuts and candy and animals on the staircase leading up to the clock, Drosselmeir collared their, well, their collars. With his hand firmly gripping the necks of their blue velvet jackets, Drosselmeir dragged them down from the balustrades they were scaling, and out of reach of the Nutcracker.

Exhaling in relief and fear combined, Drosselmeir glared down at the boys. He realized something was amiss, wrong, and definitely weird. Their eyes were hungry, dark, with a great deal of rodent red. Their noses bunched and scrunched and sniffed and whiffed. And all the while their two front teeth bucked over their lips and gleamed a nasty yellow. Drosselmeir had to blink. When that didn't change their appearance, which he really hoped he was imagining, he shook the three of them and blinked again for good measure.

Before him stood three very silly-looking boys – the boys could thank their blue velvet suits for this. No matter how much they had complained to their mothers that they made them look stupid, at last the suits had become an asset and got them out of a very tight spot –

for Drosselmeir decided he was making a mouse out of a trio. And with some very sharp words on the mischief they had caused, he sent them packing to a corner where he, Drosselmeir, could keep a very sharp eye on them.

The boys went, but they weren't happy, and they weren't really sure WHY they were so unhappy, other than the normal can't stand-still-and-be-good-for-half-a-second sort of unhappiness any boy feels when forced to stand still. No. They were really unhappy and this unhappiness ate at them like a rat gnawing at their insides. And even while they stood as still as blocks of wood under the scrutiny of Drosselmeir, inside they were on fire and itching, longing and planning how to get back at that Nutcracker, which for some reason they couldn't explain, had become the most important thing on earth for each one of them to put his grubby little hands on. As they stood there, they were outwardly complying, but inside they were stomping the Nutcracker to bits.



CHAPTER 25

When Plans Don't Work Out



Not all of our plans work out. There are plans that shouldn't work out, like when we plan to build a fort by digging in the banks of the river, and some adult comes along before we're half-finished, and takes away all our shovels, and alerts the rest of the parents in the neighborhood, and there is this sudden ban on playing by the river. Which is good. Otherwise, we would end up like Theodore's cousin, Bradley's friend, whose brother, Jerome, HAD dug out a fort in a sandy bank of the Fulda and when the whole thing had collapsed on his head, he almost suffocated. No, it's true that some of our plans are better off stopped.

But then again, there are plans for which there is no reason on earth to stop. In fact, there are a bi-jillion reasons you can give to justify, assure, and explain why your plan is such a good plan.

And that is what Clara was doing at this very moment, for Mother Stahlbaum had returned with a bevy of maids.

Clara tried to explain her reluctance, abhorrence and distaste for any of the plans to marry her off, explaining, one by one, over and over, in various ways and in various decibels which were growing louder and louder – as if an increase in sound would create an increase in understanding.

But Mother Stahlbaum wasn't buying. In fact, she was barely listening.

And to Clara's dismay, Mother Stahlbaum – with the maids behind her – were, through sheer mass, nudging the very reluctant Clara toward the door. This is when Clara pulled out Plan B and just said, "NO!" It stopped the room cold. Maids melted away to avoid any fall-out from Mother Stahlbaum.

And Mother Stahlbaum, for once, quit talking. In fact, she asked Clara to repeat herself, for she knew this wasn't Marie talking – it had to be Clara.

And Clara did repeat herself. "I said, 'No!'"

With Mother Stahlbaum still standing there, Clara did what we all have done. She mistook anger that had made someone speechless, for silence – which usually means 'Go ahead, I'm listening.'

"Mother, please! I don't want to go down. And I don't want to marry anyone. I want to be free to read and experiment and ..."

Oh my, Clara realized, *I want Franz! Do I mean, Clara thought to herself, like boyfriend/girlfriend? Do I miss him or our tinkering together? Both*, she realized, growing a little queasy, *she wanted both!*

But all she said was, "I'm not ready."

And that's *how* Clara found out that silence can mean the opposite of "Go ahead, I'm listening," for at that moment, Mother Stahlbaum exploded (not in the real sense, but with really, really, loud words).

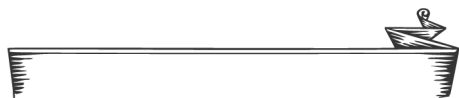
"Let me tell you something, missy. I planned this party, paid for this party and primped for this party, and you – you are going to this party! And you'd better grow up and face facts – it's time to find a husband."

And that's *how* Clara found out *who* was in control.

And that's also *where* Clara found herself – out on the landing with Mother Stahlbaum behind her, and with the eyes of all the guests on her. And she could swear she heard all the eligible, but infuriatingly disappointing bachelors smack their lips.

And that's *how* Clara found out that Plan B was not going to work. And that's *when* Clara switched to Plan C.

Plan C was simple – avoid bachelors like the plague.



CHAPTER 26

A Twitch Is All It Took



As Clara stood at the top of the stairs, Reggie froze in the dark corner between the wall and the clock. Fortunately for him, mice, if they remain still, are usually invisible to humans. It's only when they move that we catch them from the corner of our eye and scream, "There's a mouse in the house!"

Reggie didn't move. In fact, he hardly breathed. Even when the feathers from Mother Stahlbaum's headdress tickled his nose and made his eyes tear, he strangled the sneeze and kept quiet. For every mouse knows (even an almost four-foot tall mouse) that BAD THINGS hap-

pen when they are spotted by a human. And Reggie had years of experience of becoming invisible when his own dear mummy threw a royal fit. So he could disappear in shadow and never move an eyelash.

But he watched and listened and what he heard turned his heart to ice. For he heard the fat woman call the skinny girl, “Marie! Marie!” and then, with obvious impatience, the woman shouted, “Clara!” Now Reggie couldn’t remember WHY the name Clara was so scary. All he knew was that her very name almost made him jump and give away the fact that there was a mouse in the house. But his early years of training did him well and even pure fear was not able to startle a movement. Well, maybe one of his whiskers twitched.

And that twitch was all it took.

Clara felt the move more than she saw the move, and she swerved to look. But all she saw was a vague shadow before Mother Stahlbaum gave her a little push toward the stairs, and the butler announced her name. Her father appeared at the foot of the stairs, looking displeased at the wait, then relieved at the sight of his daughter now doing her duty. And so, Clara was forced to descend to the coming-out party that would determine her life’s partner.

Unless Plan C worked, that is.

But back we go to Reggie. He was in a state of nerves like he’d never been before – he was sure Clara – that awful name – Clara had seen him! And horror of horrors, Reggie saw Drosselmeir coming out of the crowd, and Drosselmeir had the Nutcracker in his arms. And now it was all coming back to Reggie, for Drosselmeir had said something about Clara breaking the spell!

Whatever could he do? He was a mouse among men.

Reggie did the only thing a mouse could do – he turned tail and ran. Into the clock, down the corridor and back to his mummy.

CHAPTER 27

Are You Man or Are You Mouse?



Reggie's headlong flight slowed at about the time he could see the light coming through the Clock Tower door. It faltered more, as he slipped out the door and into the throne room in the Land of Sweets. And it died completely, at the glare the Mouse Queen threw his way when she saw him standing there.

The Mouse Queen was surrounded by empty candy wrappers and half-eaten pies, and she was working on a giant gingerbread house, for she was eating more and enjoying it less. Gone were the days of quick energy and instant joy from a couple candy bars and a handful of toffee.

Sugar highs were a thing of the past and her hunger had grown as fast as she had increased in size. Her mood swings had become legendary in the Land of Sweets. Right now, she was down in the dumps and just waiting for something irritating to come by – to give her half an excuse to blow up in a fit of anger and work off some of her sugary overindulgences.

Poor Reggie had walked smack-dab into the center of the storm.

The Mouse Queen was so excited to vent her anger that she actually stood up – an exercise she had not done without help since coming to power and gorging non-stop. The entire mouse population cowered in fear and trembling as she walked, on her own two legs, across the room to the poor mouse – whom they all thought was sure to get the ax, suffer the consequences, and generally get stomped on.

Here's where being a coward became very useful, for Reggie had learned early on how to turn his mummy's fury into someone else's worry. And, so, he burst out about Clara! Drosselmeir was going to give the Nutcracker to Clara. And Clara would break the spell. It was all Clara's fault!

In less than a swish of her tail, the Mouse Queen had grabbed Reggie by the scruff of his neck and, holding him tight, propelled him through the clock and back to the Stahlbaums'. That's when Reggie realized exactly how much bigger his momma had gotten, for he was now crushed flat inside the clock by her layers and layers of fat.

From the clock, the Mouse Queen observed the party and saw Drosselmeir pressed back from Clara by all the suitors clamoring to be introduced. She realized there was still time to destroy that particular piece of annoying wood, which in essence was Franz. But she needed to keep Clara occupied, to give the spell she'd laid on the boys time to goad them on to its utter destruction. As her sugar-charged brain bounced around for ideas, her watery eyes landed on Reggie.

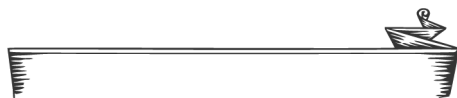
Reggie thought he'd throw up, when he saw the Mouse Queen's eyes land on him; he felt he was cornered by the butcher's cat. Whatever.

er she had planned was going to land on his shoulders, and to be perfectly honest, his shoulders were shaking at the very thought of the unknown.

“The question,” the Mouse Queen purred.

Heavens! Reggie thought, *she evens sounds like a cat!*

“The question is,” his mummy repeated, “are you man, or are you mouse?”



CHAPTER 28

The Making of a Man



“**T**here comes a time,” the Mouse Queen explained as she untangled Reggie from her apron strings, “when a young mouse must prove himself.” (I know, I know, Queens don’t have aprons, but work with me here. This is a **MOMENT OF IMPORT**. A rite of passage. The boy’s being booted out.)

Standing alone in the full light that filtered into the clock from the brightly lit landing, Reggie cringed and waited, hiding in the corners and shadows where he had grown up. In fact, he tried to slip back into the folds of his mummy’s skirts, but a not-so-gentle kick of her size elevens nudged him back to stand alone, on his own. And alone is how he felt.

Imagine being the last one to stand on stage and quote your poem before the entire school, after everyone else had performed and no one made a mistake. And now you are up there, before the principal and everyone – parents, teachers, classmates, and even the janitor! And for the life of you, you cannot remember how your poem begins. That's how Reggie felt. Except that for him, the school bully was waiting off stage (okay, okay – inside the clock), ready to pounce as soon as he made one tiny wrong move.

Continuing her mother/son words of wisdom, the Mouse Queen elaborated, "Today is your day, Reginald. Up to this day you have lavished all your cares and affections on your dearest mama. But today – today, I shall teach you how to win a wife!"

"Forget the Princess Pirlipat – she's but a toad, a troll, a trollop. Here's finer booty, better loot, and a hotter cutie! Yes, mummy shall forever be number one in your life. But now it's time for you – to find a wife! I'll show you how to make a pass, steal a kiss, sweet-talk a lass. To-day you'll learn how to turn that pretty head your way. Because today – you become a man."

Not at all sure that he wanted to leave his mother, and positive that he never wanted to get close enough to kiss a human, Reggie opened his mouth to protest. But the Mouse Queen clamped it shut and held it captive in her long-clawed paw.

"You wouldn't want to disappoint your mummy, now would you?" She swiveled his snout back and forth in the negative.

"You want to always put mummy's wishes first, now don't you?" She raised his snout up and down in the affirmative.

With a playful, but slightly painful slap, she released his snout and continued. "So here's what you do!" And then she got down to the business of making a Romeo out of a rodent.

"First, share the cheese. Second, don't offer half-gnawed cookies. Third, scratch her back on the spot she can't reach – just like you do for Mummy. Fourth, don't laugh at her tiny little teeth, and be sure to

smile and show how beautifully long and yellow your teeth are. Fifth, lick her behind her ears – she'll love that. Sixth, never offer treats with your paws down – always extend the treat on the tip of your longest and sharpest nail. And finally, when the time has come to propose, be sure to bite her on the back of her neck. That, my dear, is guaranteed to make any miss swoon at your feet. But let me caution you – use it only when you've finally got her alone. The parents might object."

This, actually, struck Reggie as extremely funny and, in spite of himself, he laughed – and then wished he'd swallowed a bucket of nails instead.

"Just what do you find so funny?" the Mouse Queen grated out.

It seemed he couldn't stop. The thought of himself, a mouse, courting the young lady of the house – and of a mouse giving a girl cheese and treating her to cookies – was funny. And Reggie blurted out, "Do you really think she'll fall for a rat?" (Reggie always thought of himself in the grander form of rodenthood and never as a diminutive mouse.)

The Mouse Queen looked down on Reggie and realized that even a MOUSE wouldn't fall for him; he was such a runty, ratty, stupid little thing. With a sigh, and an intense longing to be done with all this and return to the table of goodies waiting for her back in the Land of Sweets, she considered the sad fact that her son was a loser in the looks department. But, she thought, he was a mean-spirited, slimy, backbiting son – and was sure to go places. In a lot of ways, he was a chip off the old block. That thought gave her comfort. She could always count on Reggie to do a nasty trick. And what she had in store for Clara was mean and nasty and should put her out of commission for a long, long while, for we all know that bites are bad news.

The Mouse Queen looked at Reggie for so long that, at first, he was relieved. She wasn't going to send him, after all! *Better off staying away from anything on two legs*, was his first thought.



Then, perversely enough, Reggie began to get angry at the thought that maybe his mother didn't think he was good enough to go. Here she was, wishing she had another son, a good son. Well, he'd show her. He'd go out right now and do it all. Reggie stamped his leg and spun around to exit the clock, but the Mouse Queen spun him back.

"No. No," she said, and Reggie's heart dropped.

See, he thought, I'm never good enough.

While all the while the Mouse Queen was thinking he was really bad enough, and was convinced that Reggie could pull it off. Actually, what was happening, was the Mouse Queen was dying for more sugar and growing more antsy and impatient by the second, and just wanted the whole thing off her paws so she could get back and EAT.

"You're perfect," she cooed, and Reggie's heart leapt. "Or will be," she corrected, and Reggie's heart sank.

As Reggie saw the Mouse Queen raise Krakatuk, his heart shrieked. Crying out in fear, he tried to dodge the blow. But there was nowhere to go inside the clock, and she smacked him right between the ears.

Reggie's ears rang and his whole body tingled – he felt he was being torn apart, from the inside out. And so, he was.

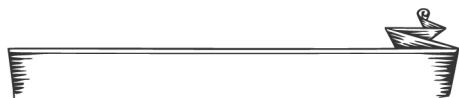
For at that very moment, the Mouse Queen had turned Reggie into the handsome young prince of Mother Stahlbaum's dreams – but with-

out the handsome part, or the rich, and, definitely, yes definitely, without the generous part.

But, thought the Mouse Queen as she surveyed her handiwork, he's definitely a prince and he has the finest, longest yellow teeth of any prince I have ever seen. And his eyes are a flashing black, with just the right dash of rodent red! Yes, the Mouse Queen thought, he's so cute I could fall for him myself.

And with that tender, motherly thought, the Mouse Queen kicked Reggie out of the clock and onto the landing. Then, with the instinct of a mouse, born and raised in a fine manor home, she imitated the deep, somber tones of the butler and announced her son. "His imperial, royal highness, Prince Reginald Rhatt." And then she hissed out the door to her son, "Don't come back again unless the Nutcracker is destroyed – or I'll turn you into something worse!"

And with those loving words, she stomped back down the long corridor, growing more irritated with her son with every step and every second it took her to get back to the plate of fudge she'd left, only a few minutes before.



CHAPTER 29

My Prince Has Come at Last



Mother Stahlbaum was overjoyed! Just look at the richness of his velvets, the length of his lace, the sweep of his satin and the – oh, my – the length and tint of his teeth! But, then again, the gold buttons on his jacket and the silver of his buckles! Mother Stahlbaum almost swooned – her prince had come at last.

Except for the tiny little fact that it was for Clara that he had come.

But Mother Stahlbaum wouldn't let small things like the truth get her down. She hauled Father Stahlbaum to the foot of the stairs – to welcome their new guest. No, no. To honor, adore and lavish insane amounts of gushing, gooey, gobs of greeting on their new guest.

If Father Stahlbaum had been a jealous man, he would have booted the boy out the door at that very moment. But Father Stahlbaum was more of the punctual and none of the jealous – or even observant – frame of mind. His ruler was the clock. And as he looked at his pocket watch, he decided that the Prince had arrived within the bounds of propriety, and therefore, there was no reason whereby he should not welcome the lad.

And welcome they did. Pretty soon, a wiser man would have wished for a shovel to clean up all the free-flowing flatulence and firmer forms of flattery that soon had Reggie buried hip-deep. But did I ever say Reggie was wise? I think you know the answer to that!

Reggie was loving it, glorying in the praise – worthy or not – and basking in the sweet, sweet sounds of a mother’s love. Who cared if it was not *his* mother, and none of it was true? For the first time in his life, Reggie was being complimented, courted and catered to. It was heaven. It was so lovely, that he forgot all about Clara.

Which was fine by her.

Clara edged as far away as she humanly could, into the press of partygoers who were eager to be noticed, or even touched, by a real prince. Clara was blissfully forgotten. Even her suitors were scrambling for a chance to brush shoulders with nobility. All the eager young girls were swooning in corners and fanning themselves in ways that they firmly believed would drive the prince crazy, so that he would rush into their waiting arms. Everyone’s attention was on the prince.

For this was the prince of her dreams – the nightmare of the worst possible scenario, coming out of her mother’s years of schemes! Schemes and dreams that created a cold, heavy lump in her stomach. Even when Clara shut her eyes, she could still see beady black points, backed with a dull red. And when she opened her eyes, all she could see were long, yellow, impossibly SHARP looking teeth. No way she was letting *that* get close to her.

But what was most terrifying of all was that he was beaming, positively glowing under her mother’s barrage. The only good thing to come out of his arrival was that her mother was no longer preoccupied with pointing out this young man, or that young man, to Clara.

Which was fine by her.

The two of them could keep each other company for the rest of the night, for all she cared! They could spend every day together for the entire week. No, a month. Clara reveled in the idea of Mother Stahlbaum being so tied up with this ratty prince that she, Clara, would have hours of time stretching out in front of her, in which to tinker and read, read and tinker, in uninterrupted bliss.

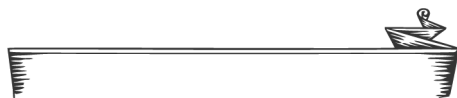
Which was absolutely and completely fine by her!

But it was not to be. All of a sudden, everyone was turning about in confusion, looking for something – did the prince bust a button after puffing up with pride? Or did his monocle fly off, as his head swelled? Clara didn't know which. But she didn't let it slow her down. She snuck toward the back stairs, where she hoped she could slip back up to her bedroom and out of this nightmare.

But no. They weren't looking for something – they were looking for someone – and that someone was Clara.

Beaming with pride, as if she had conjured up the prince with her own strength of mind and determination, Mother Stahlbaum – with both Father Stahlbaum and Prince Reginald Rhatt (fitting name, Clara thought) in tow – was sailing like a ship with all sails up, toward Clara. And as the orchestra struck up the first dance, her parents placed the cold, scaly hand of the prince into Clara's hand and – when they found out a little push wouldn't do – shoved Clara into the first waltz of the night.

Which was NOT fine by her.



CHAPTER 30

A Miss is as Good as a Mile



Drosselmeir had not been idle during his wait for Clara. He'd had plenty of things to do – staying out of Mother Stahlbaum's sight being one of them. And Mother Stahlbaum had been with Clara most of the night (except for her frequent charges down the back stairs to check that the hired help were earning their wages, and the regular staff was not quaffing the eggnog and sampling the pastries). So Drosselmeir had had little chance to actually make contact with Clara.

In fact, the non-likelihood of his being able to even SEE Clara before the party, had been made quite clear when he had attempted to go up the staircase to her room. He was met by such a flourish of aprons and flicking of hands and rising of eyebrows and tut-tutting of tongues from the army of maids wearing a rut in the carpet between Clara's bedroom and the sewing room, that he was forced to retreat.

Drosselmeir had backed down the stairs, thinking how a man might be willing to face a charging buffalo or to rush into a raging fire, long before a man would ever find the courage to push through a bevy of females preparing for a party. And by a man, he meant himself.

Besides, Drosselmeir was wise enough to know that there were times and places, ways and means, when a pressing need, an urgent necessity, or even an overwhelming desire could not be filled on command. And as life-shattering as it was that his living, breathing nephew was now a solid, wooden Nutcracker – and that a land of innocents was

being ravished and eaten at that very moment on the other side of the clock – all the cares and concerns that weighed heavy on his shoulders would have to wait – while the women dressed for the party.

Making a scene, he had realized, would only get him thrown out.

Deciding that a meeting with Clara before the party was nigh to impossible, Drosselmeir had found a niche on the staircase, behind several elaborately-carved nut trees, and had carefully hidden the Nutcracker. If he couldn't see Clara, then he wanted to double-check the lock on the clock. It wouldn't do to introduce magic mice into a very un-magical house. It would be almost as bad as introducing mice into a land of sweets! And Drosselmeir already had enough guilt hounding his dreams for a lifetime, for having piped the children through the clock, in the first place.

And then, as he had made his way to the back stairs, Drosselmeir had stopped, for that was where he had encountered the boys making a mess of the table and had stopped them from attacking the Nutcracker.

This brings us back to Clara, who had been trying to make her escape during the uproar over Prince R.R.

Drosselmeir, with the Nutcracker once more safely in his arms, trudged and nudged his way through the guests, who were flowing like the tide to the Stahlbaums and their Prince – and toward Clara, who was elbowing and ducking around the flow of bodies, toward the back staircase and her escape. Just as these two had broken free and Drosselmeir thought his chance to reach Clara had come, the tide had turned, eddied around Clara's ankles and swarmed around her knees until she had been swallowed in a wave of people bearing her back to her parents – and the honor of dancing with the now-royal Reggie.

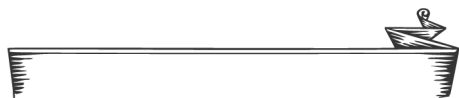
As Drosselmeir had watched Clara being pulled away, he had thought – and not for the first time – how parties are a most inconvenient time to try to talk to someone, especially when that someone is the *belle* of the ball, and the list on her dance card was already filled

on both sides, and around her was a circle three-deep of eligible young bachelors. *Or so called "eligible,"* he thought.

He had been so close to her, but he knew since Clara had not even seen him, that it had been as if he did not even exist.

Torn apart in concern for the safety of his nephew and the fear of mice chewing down the castle walls, Drosselmeir pushed back into the crowd in hopes of making his way to Clara's side, where all his hopes for Franz lay.

One little miss would not slow him down.



CHAPTER 31

A Miss is as Good as Her Man



Clara spent the entire dance slipping away from, rather than dancing with, the “Ratty Prince,” as she thought of him. She reconfigured Plan C: “Stay away from eligible bachelors,” to Plan D: “Stay FAR away from the Prince.” And so far, so good.

Her only problem lay in the party guests and her parents.

First it was her mother telling her that she was so lucky – a catch like the Prince doesn’t come along every day. And then it was the young mothers congratulating her and, to Clara’s mind, secretly happy that she, too, would soon be spending time changing diapers and chasing rug-rats – because, of course, that’s the type of kids she’d have if she ever married this creepy, crawly prince. Then, when the mothers were called away to tend to their bundles of joy, the girls engulfed Clara.

Good grief, the girls.

With visions of sugarplums and pink satin slippers, the girls all thought life with a Prince would be a life filled with bon-bons and a fairy-tale ending. *Well*, Clara thought as she danced past their simpering sighs, *if they want their sugar plums delivered at the end of one of the Prince’s long, curved nails, they are free to pursue him right out the door, down the street, and out of my life*. Under the cover of a dozen satin sashes and petticoats galore, Clara slipped further away from her mother’s watch and her partner’s reach.

And bumped right into Aunt Hildegard. The oldest person on the planet. And never married. And not one bit happy about it.

“Girlie,” the old lady chirped, “grab that man by his cummerbund and don’t ever let go. Take it from me – without a man you might as well die.”

Deciding this was not an axiom she cared to live by, Clara nodded her head but rebelled in her heart. She could do quite well on her own, thank you very much. But being brought up in polite company, Clara did not tell the old lady that she thought her crazy. Instead, she leaned over to allow Aunt Hildegard to peck her cheek. However, Clara did scream inside, when her aunt took the opportunity to whisper fiercely, “He’s quite a prize – don’t you do anything foolish!”

With her aunt’s hot, dry kiss burning her cheek, and her sad old cry freezing her heart, Clara turned away, intent this time to bolt up the back stairs and hide until the summer sun could thaw the cold frozen hold that now gripped her heart.

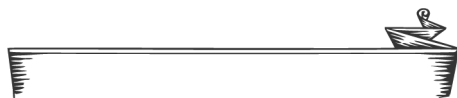
Clara was well on her way out of the dance, when Mother Stahlbaum appeared out of nowhere and with a deft spin and a sure push, Clara found herself in the arms of the Prince. Once again. And all the guests and all her relatives were applauding and laughing, and in each of their eyes, Clara read victory, relief, sheer joy and envy that she, Clara Stahlbaum, had been so lucky to win such a prize.

Clara wanted to puke.

I mean, she really wanted to puke, all-over the Prince if she could arrange it, for puking had suddenly become Plan E. Clara figured, if she couldn’t stay away from a Prince, then the next best thing was to make sure he wanted to stay away from her.

And puking was the only thing she could think of. Except that Clara was finding it harder to puke on command than she ever thought possible. Now that she thought of it, she realized she wasn’t the puking kind. And she knew that Plan E was out the window before she even had much time to try it.

Which made her feel like puking.



CHAPTER 32

Rat Bait



Clara felt she was trapped like a fox in a box or snagged like a fish in a net. Then she realized she hadn't fallen for the bait – she WAS the bait. And the way the Prince was looking at her made her cover the back of her neck with her hand. Because she was sure he wanted to bite the bait. At that point, Clara decided she was going a little wonkers and she'd better get a grip on reality.

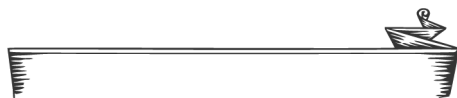
She told herself the Prince was a perfectly normal royal offspring and she was being foolish, imagining he was a rat. Just because she didn't want a prince didn't mean she needed to villainize the man. Even if his eyes were beady and tinged with red, that didn't mean he was an evil monster. It just made him scary. Clara couldn't understand why everyone else wanted to snuggle up – couldn't they smell his breath? Maybe it was just her. Maybe she was just a bad person being mean to someone she didn't know.

Clara was at the point of going against her own instincts. We've all been there. Something tells us to keep our distance from the *whatever* – car, alley, door, person or bushes – and we try to tell ourselves we're being silly, or worse – treating someone unfairly or being unkind. We end up calling ourselves a coward and, in effect, dare ourselves to take a chance. And then we walk right into something bad.

So, Clara came up with Plan F – the “No harm can come from dancing with a Prince, and it will make Mother happy and get her off my back” plan.

When Clara’s skin began to crawl as the Prince took her hand, and she heard her mother gloating about wedding bells, she began to doubt that any plan of hers would ever work. And when she felt the Prince sweep her hair off her shoulder and heard him whisper in her ear, she began to panic because, even though she was being wooed, the wooer was drooling on her neck. And she was afraid he was marking the spot where he would sink the blades of his yellow teeth.

And Clara knew she had walked straight into a trap – knowing it was a trap – and she was the bait.



CHAPTER 33

Sprung Free



No plans came to Clara then. And being without a plan was a terror to Clara. And even though she danced and swirled with her prince, Clara was frozen stiff with fear.

She couldn't have been happier, than when the entire dance was interrupted by a flash and a bang and a puff of smoke. The shock snapped her out of her trance, and she leaped out of the arms of the Prince as easily as if she had planned it.

What had happened?

Now, Drosselmeir had been watching Clara and was dismayed to see her accept a dance with the Prince. *Who is this prince, anyway?* Drosselmeir thought. *In all my travels, I've never come across him or his kingdom.* As Drosselmeir watched, he realized there was more going on than met the eye. *There was a spell in process!* Drosselmeir didn't know who this upstart of a prince was. But he, Drosselmeir, Godfather to Clara – even if he were on the outs with Mother Stahlbaum – still loved, and would protect, Clara. So Drosselmeir did what any wizard-clockmaker, mechanical-genius would do. He brought out his bag of tricks.

Flash powder gave the crowd a satisfying shock and woke up Clara nicely. Now, to get her away from the Prince, Drosselmeir pulled out a couple of dancing dolls. As he expected, the crowd went gaga and surged forward, giving him just enough time to catch Clara's eye.

And those eyes widened in shock, then disbelief, in what she was seeing, and then relief, and finally, excitement.

And at that moment, Clara threw all her plans out the window, in the pure joy that Godfather Drosselmeir was back. And if he was back, then Franz was nearby. Franz! Clara flushed and felt her stomach flip-flop – and why was she so suddenly hot? And where was Franz? Just as quickly as she had been happy, she grew a little irritated. It was about time they showed up! Then, just as suddenly, she smiled – but they were here at last. Or at least, Godfather Drosselmeir was.

But, where was Franz?

All these emotions and thoughts took about a second (or fifteen), before Clara began to shyly slip around the circle of guests, all clamoring for a look at the dolls. And now, she was growing irritated at herself for being shy. *This is Drosselmeir*, she told herself, *and Franz is – well, just Franz.*

Then Clara caught sight of herself in the grand mirror over the fireplace and the sight stopped her cold. *I might be Clara*, she thought, *but I'm not the same Clara who played with Franz in the attic.* And try as she might to deny it, Clara knew she had grown older that night. It wasn't the clothes, or her hair. It was her heart. And with the turmoil of the last two and a half hours – the exact moment when she thought of Franz in relation to what she wanted – from that very moment on, she knew she had stopped being a child.

Rats!

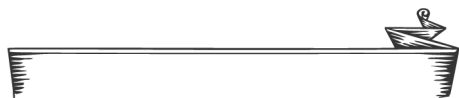
It changed everything. Yet Clara had no idea how – or what – it had changed. But here she was – acting like some silly miss of timidity – too shy to go over and give her godfather a kiss hello.

And that one moment of hesitation cost Clara her escape. For the Prince had spied her slipping away and had complained to Mother Stahlbaum about the magic show and blamed that old man over there of scaring Clara. Just look at her, she was positively white. And it was true; the shock of all her emotions had turned Clara positively pale.

Then Mother Stahlbaum flushed roarily red, for she had spied Drosselmeir. And Mother Stahlbaum knew that wherever Drosselmeir was, so was Franz. And Franz was the last person she wanted to see tonight – although with all the non-working clocks in the house, Drosselmeir came in a close second. This worked out very well for the Prince, because between him and Mother Stahlbaum, they were able to head off Clara. But they reckoned, without knowing Clara's new status as a freshly-formed female.

Where she had been an obedient (well, maybe not *so* obedient) child before, Clara now refused to be bullied. And she flatly refused the next dance – or any dance for that matter. *My heart belongs to someone else*, she said to herself, for she was still too shy to say anything like that out loud. So instead of saying what she was feeling, she was rude to a guest, which she felt guilty about, right after she saw the shock on her mother's face. But looking at the nasty glint in the Prince's eye, Clara was glad she would never have to be within arm's reach of that particular royal, ever again!

And she rushed away, feeling happier than she had all year.



CHAPTER 34

Together Again, And Wondering Who You Are



Have you ever had a special friend who moved away and you didn't see for a year or two? And all that time you'd missed them and re-lived all the games and adventures you'd shared – the secrets that only the two of you knew? And how you spent half the year missing them and the other half dreaming how, once they came back, you'd head for the basement or tree house – or wherever your special hidey-hole might be – and start again, in exactly the same spot, where you'd left off?

Clara was in that “together at last!” state of mind as she rushed toward Godfather Drosselmeir. She couldn't wait to throw herself into his arms and feel his wiry, crazy hair on her cheeks. But as she came up to him, what happened to Clara is exactly what happens to so many long-time separated friends – you discover they've changed. And it's not just that someone has grown taller or has new glasses or cut their hair. The person you meet is a different person. If you're lucky, it's the same person inside, who looks a little different on the outside, and this may take some getting used to. But sometimes, the person may look exactly the same, but they've changed on the inside. And it's a little scary. And it almost always makes you sad, because your heart was set on seeing the person you remembered, and not the person they've become.

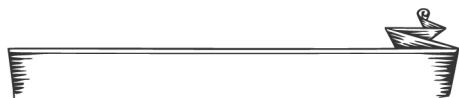
So Clara was in the middle of a little adjustment, for Godfather Drosselmeir was no longer the eccentric, affable and loving godfather of her memory, but a wild and worried wizard who was looking at her with flaming eyes and holding out an extremely repulsive-looking giant Nutcracker. Clara skidded to a stop, halting her headlong rush, and stared. Who was this man? It was like rushing to the door, expecting your grandpa to come through, only to have him run through the door, dressed like a grizzly bear and growling at the top of his lungs – except that would be funny, after you got over being scared. But Clara didn't think anything about Godfather Drosselmeir was funny.

Godfather Drosselmeir, on the other hand, was even more shocked than Clara.

He had expected a gangly girl in braids, with teeth too big for her sweet little face. What he saw was a young lady and a beauty, who, at that very moment, was looking at him in what he could only describe as terror. Drosselmeir, for not the first time in his life, regretted his extremely bushy shock of hair and exceeding tall height. For he knew he was frightening at the best of times, and he could only imagine what he looked like after a year of no haircuts and only cursory shaves. When he thought of it, the poor girl must think him a lunatic.

Well, if she thought that now, Drosselmeir reflected ruefully, wait until he told her about Franz! But he saw no way around that particular fact, and refusing to remain stuck on the horns of the dilemma, Drosselmeir made his way toward Clara. He was very happy to see Clara only took two quick steps back, before she swallowed hard, and then walked quickly to meet him.

By the time they'd crossed the space between them, the past pushed through, and Clara recognized her old Godfather Drosselmeir – inside – and smiled. That smile reassured Drosselmeir, and they met each other with a hug.



CHAPTER 35

Don't Tell Me What I Don't Want to Hear



Clara's first words – involuntarily, for she couldn't hold them back – were, “Where's Franz?” She had no idea why Godfather Drosselmeir's eyes watered, except perhaps he was growing old. At least that's what she hoped, because the alternative was too horrible to imagine and made her a little panicky. “Where is he?” She wished he'd reply.

Instead, her godfather took the nasty old Nutcracker and laid him in her arms – and he still didn't speak.

Now Clara thought the worst – Franz was gone forever! Withholding a whimper out of pure desperation, Clara whispered, “Where’s Franz?” for the last time.

She tried to shut her ears immediately after asking the question, because she feared the answer. And, not for the first time in her life, she was angry that she couldn’t shut out sounds she didn’t want to hear.

Why, she thought, can I shut my eyes and not see what I don’t want to see, hold my nose and not smell what I don’t want to smell – but my hearing is so good that no matter how much I cover my ears or put cotton inside, I can still hear?

And this time – even though this was the most-scary of all times, and even though she had asked, and even though she really did NOT WANT TO HEAR what was being said – she heard Godfather’s voice loud and clear, even though he whispered the answer to her alone: “This is Franz.”

And for Clara, the room spun, and she stared at the Nutcracker in disbelief – this ugly wooden toy wasn’t her friend. It couldn’t be the boy she had played with and dreamed of, for the entire year. This could not be Franz, when she had only discovered that very night, he meant more to her than anyone in her world?

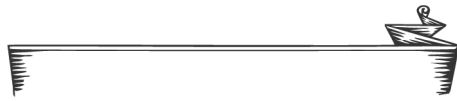
Clara refused to believe what she’d heard. In fact, she decided that the old man had finally grown senile. No, not senile. His strangeness had gone full-blown, and now this man whom she had known all her life was officially, no doubt about it, crazy. And she almost fell for it.

And she almost laughed in relief. Until, she looked back into the watery eyes of the old man.

Doubt covered her like a blanket on a hot day – she felt stifled, smothered and steaming hot. Clara couldn’t drag her eyes from Drosselmeir’s, until he said, “Help him,” and then she shifted her gaze, to look into the wooden eyes of the Nutcracker.

Shocked, she realized its eyes were the same color as Franz’s.

And she almost dropped the Nutcracker.



CHAPTER 36

Shocks Seem to Come in Threes



The shock of having Franz look *back* at her was big enough – but a bigger and more horrifying shock was running straight at her – and that’s often how life goes. One shock, two shocks, three.

At that very moment, the boys, who’d been a major source of irritation to everyone at this party, had honed-in on the Nutcracker in Clara’s arms. In that split second, when she almost dropped it out of shock, they swept up, grabbed it by its wooden leg, and rushed away.

A general hubbub arose among all the guests, who had been watching what they thought was a very touching scene between godfather and godchild. The guests joined in the chase to catch the scoundrels who had stolen the gift – however odd it might be – given by godfather to godchild, on her coming-out night.

At first, it seemed like a silly prank – boys being boys. Then it became very clear that the boys were bent on destruction. You could tell by the way they frothed at the mouth and tore through the room, dodging between the skirts, and under the legs, of the adults who tried to stop them. Fortunately for the Nutcracker, the whole room was bent on stopping the boys – everyone that is, except Prince Reginald Rhatt.

Reggie, after the snub from Clara, had only felt relief at getting away from the two-legged female who looked at him like the rat he wanted to be. And in that rush of relief, he made a beeline for the buffet table, where he bolstered himself back up by downing every sweet, cheese and chocolate he could find. Halfway through a tart, he broke into a cold sweat, and not from overeating – mice never get sick from that – but from the thought of his mother! And he knew he'd have to find Clara again and finish the deed he had been sent to do.

And just as Reggie had come to this realization, he had looked up to see Drosselmeir hand the Nutcracker to Clara, and had choked on the very tart he was in the process of swallowing. The Nutcracker! In a real panic, Reggie had coughed and hacked, as Mother Stahlbaum whacked and whacked on his back. Rudely pushing her aside, Reggie had finally caught his breath – when the boys stole the Nutcracker. Maybe, he thought weakly, maybe he would live after all.

Then, as we so often do when we've been really, really scared, Reggie turned angry. Angry at mummy dearest, angry at the boys who were running around and NOT destroying the Nutcracker, and angriest at Clara. It was her fault he was here in the first place, her fault Drosselmeir had run away with the Nutcracker, her fault that he'd had to leave the Land of Sweets and come back here – where he could get

badly hurt! Clara! It was all her fault! And if he ever had the chance, he was going to make her pay!

But first he was going to make sure the Nutcracker was destroyed.

And with that thought, Reggie deftly stuck out his booted foot and tripped Father Stahlbaum just before he caught one of the boys. Of course, he immediately gushed an apology and hindered Father Stahlbaum even more as he “helped” him get up. This gave the boys a good solid chance to run up the stairs. And before anyone could say, “Boo!” the boys had swung the Nutcracker over the balcony and out into the air. The entire party stopped cold, as everyone watched the Nutcracker drop down and crash, onto the marble floor of the ballroom below.

Don’t believe anyone when they say accidents go into slow motion, or it seems like it takes forever when watching something bad happen. The Nutcracker dropped so fast and hit so hard, that those who were looking at the boys at the top of the stairs never saw the Nutcracker hit the floor. Before they could jerk their heads down to the marble floor, the Nutcracker had already bounced up once and was on its way back down. This fooled enough of the guests so that many of them swore they saw the thing hit the floor.

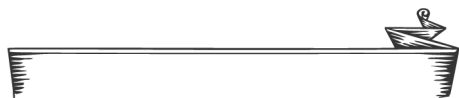
The one person who saw the whole thing was Clara. She never took her eyes off the Nutcracker from the moment the boys grabbed him from her arms. In fact, she was hot on their tails the entire time they were running about, and

she would have caught them, too, if that nasty Prince so-and-so had not tripped her father and slowed her down. By the time she had jumped around the two of them, the boys were already at the top of the stairs, and Clara was too far away to catch the Nutcracker, even though she was running full speed.

But she was the first to reach the Nutcracker, and she was amazed to see it in one piece. Except its jaw, which was broken and hanging loosely from its hinges. Clara almost sobbed aloud.

If this was Franz – and she still couldn't believe it was – did he feel the pain of a broken jaw?





CHAPTER 37

Boys and Trouble Are Best When They Are Gone



Clara was so caught up with the Nutcracker she didn't see Drosselmeir sprint up the stairs to the boys, who were strangely quiet for the first time all evening. No one saw Drosselmeir take a small flask, and give each boy a sip, or see him whisper in his ear. But they did see him turn the boys around and point up the stairs to their rooms – and then a cheer went up among the guests. For what they took as a just punishment and the riddance of three nuisances!

What they didn't see was Drosselmeir's sad and concerned face, and his careful double-checking that the boys were safe and sound. The guests had been completely unaware of the mission of destruction the boys had been conducting, during that entire evening.

All the boys knew was that they were terribly tired and terribly thirsty and, whatever it was in that flask, it had tasted terribly good. And now they wanted no more than to go to bed and sleep for the next three days. The boys didn't even notice the cheers at their departure, nor did they understand the next morning – when Mother Stahlbaum read them the riot act and gave them extra lessons to learn for the next three weeks. But they took it all in stride, for they were always getting in trouble for half the things they did. And half the time they couldn't remember what those things were – and when they did remember – what all the fuss was about. So, they just chalked up this new punishment as part of being a boy. And they all knew that boys were horribly picked on, and could never do half the things they wanted to do – and none of the things that they found the most interesting.

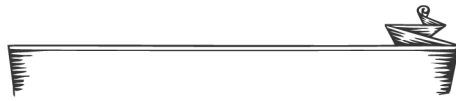
Drosselmeir, however, watched them go upstairs with a heavy heart, and a suspicion that was growing every second – and an urgency that was making his heart pound. He was sure the boys had been enchanted to destroy the Nutcracker. That could only mean one thing – the Mouse Queen was up to her old tricks, of having someone else do her dirty work, while she sat back and sipped cocoa. He had to leave immediately and go back to the Land of Sweets. Even if it meant he'd have to fight her and Krakatuk alone, he had to keep Clara and Franz safe – until Clara found a way to break Franz's spell.

How did Drosselmeir know Clara could break the spell? Every wizard worth his weight – even if he's a mechanical-clock wizard – knows that love breaks almost any spell known to man ... or mouse. And he was counting on Clara's love – which brought Drosselmeir screeching back to the moment at hand. Franz! They had thrown Franz off the balcony!

And down Drosselmeir swept, down to the foot of the stairs – to find Clara, holding the Nutcracker and pushing his broken jaw closed, only to have it drop open again. And she'd push it shut once more, and it would drop. Hard telling how long the “shut and drop” would have gone on, if Drosselmeir had not whipped out a clean handkerchief and tied the Nutcracker's jaw shut. Half of this had been a pretense on Drosselmeir's part, as he had thoroughly examined the extent of the damage done. It was a great relief to Drosselmeir to find only a slipped hinge, which he reattached, before tying the jaw shut to give it a rest. The other half, had been to give him time to whisper a warning to Clara.

A warning which she only half heard, and entirely did not understand.

Realizing Clara was in shock, and seeing Mother Stahlbaum fighting her way to them, through the guests lining up for the last dance of the evening, Drosselmeir pulled Clara to her feet and joined the dance – much to everyone's, except Reggie and Mother Stahlbaum's, relief.



CHAPTER 38

Making No Sense



Back in Clara's time, the dance floor was a place to hold polite conversation. Sometimes a single song went on for half an hour – and it was considered rude not to talk. I guess in Clara's day, there was a lot of standing around and waiting your turn to dance, involved in all this coming-out faldereal. And the music was much softer – no amps or electric guitars, you know. Therefore, Godfather Drosselmeir's plan to tell Clara all about what had befallen Franz and what she needed to do made a lot of sense. For he had only to speak quietly as they stood beside each other, waiting their turn to dance.

But it would have made things a lot easier if he'd had an entire half hour to answer all of Clara's questions and make actual sense, while he spoke. As it was, Mother Stahlbaum was bearing down on him, and Drosselmeir realized his "not-so-welcome" welcome had worn thin. And he would soon be asked to leave, or maybe even be "helped out."

So, Drosselmeir was in a rush to deliver everything Clara needed to know, and as is so often the case when we desperately need to make sense, we make no sense at all. Clara heard bits and pieces about a kingdom and candy and mice, something about Franz getting hit with a nut, but it all jumbled in her head, until she wasn't at all sure what Godfather was telling her – much less what he was asking her to do.

It made no sense.

Clara did understand that the Nutcracker was extremely important to Godfather Drosselmeir, and that HE thought the Nutcracker was Franz, and that SHE was to protect it – uh, him. When Godfather Drosselmeir cast a hasty look over her shoulder and said good-bye, Clara understood with a shock that he was leaving. And he did.

Suddenly, he was gone. One moment Drosselmeir was galloping with her down the line of dancers, then when she pirouetted at the end and turned to grasp his hand, he was gone. Clara looked behind the dancers and behind herself, but it seemed as if her Godfather had disappeared into thin air.

And that made no sense.

Clara had little time to think all this through, for her mother caught up with her at last. Now, Mother Stahlbaum was very disappointed to find Drosselmeir missing, but only because she wanted to spill out her anger on someone's head, and the polite old clockmaker seemed an easy mark to her. However, she soon realized it was all for the best, for Clara was easier to manage alone. And manage Clara she did, as she quickly herded Clara once more to the Prince, hoping yet to score a match.

Which Clara thought made no sense at all.

Reggie, however, soon discovered WHY he was feeling sweaty and dizzy and sick. He was turning back into a mouse. The first clue was when his crown slipped with a rather hard bounce onto his nose.

As he pushed it back up, Reggie was happy to feel that the small little ears of his human form had been replaced by the much more functional ears of a mouse! He had suffered all evening, not being able to hear very well. No wonder humans never noticed mice in their houses – they were stone deaf!

And when he felt hair growing thick and warm on his back, Reggie was absolutely delighted. Not only did he find the bare skin of humans as repulsive as a naked litter of baby mice, but also he had discovered just how drafty and cold a winter could be, when you don't have a layer

of fur covering every inch of your body. The entire night had been a struggle to stay warm and keep his teeth from chattering, non-stop. How did these humans survive?

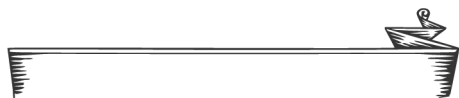
But best of all, yes, best of all, was the return of his snout! Ah, yes – his pointer, his compass, and the one thing in life that gave him perspective! Without the tip of his long, whiskery snout to help him judge distance, and smell how close things were – and when something or someone was approaching – he'd spent the entire evening bumping into chairs and tables, and being scared out of his wits every time someone approached, whom he had neither heard nor smelled! It felt good to be a mouse again.

Until Reggie realized that Aunt Hildegard was staring at him in fright. Fortunately for him, she blamed the champagne and set down her flute on the table – hard. The old lady flattened her lips in disapproval, straightened her already straight back, drew on her gloves and left the party.

Which is exactly what Reggie did – he hightailed it up the backstairs – literally – for he could feel his tail splitting his pants in the back, as he topped the last stair and hid behind the clock, from them all.

All Mother Stahlbaum saw of her Prince, when she returned to the banqueting table, were the remains of his food forage. And so she turned on Clara – and Clara knew that as far as her mother was concerned, Clara was to blame for everything.

Which made perfect sense to Clara – for wasn't she always to blame?



CHAPTER 39

A Rant, a Rave and a Writ



For the next quarter hour, Clara endured the ranting and ravings of a woman scorned – and we all know what the playwright says about *that* feminine fury! (Rhymes with bell, but I won't tell.) The fact that the woman scorned was Clara, and Clara was the one, who had done the scorning, made NO – her mother made absolutely clear – NO difference to Mother Stahlbaum. Her Prince had come ... and gone. And that was all that mattered.

And after years and years of planning for him, Mother Stahlbaum was NOT going to take his going lightly – or quietly, for that matter. And as her mother's volume increased, Clara's attention decreased. *That's the one good thing about Mama*, Clara thought, *she's a venter and, as long as there is an audience to the venting, then Mama is satisfied*. So Clara glued her eyes on Mama and – although those bright orbs of hers followed every step her mama made – Clara was far, far away from the rantings and ravings falling down upon her curls.

Clara was doing what she did best – she was puzzling and piecing, trying to make sense of the jumbled bits and fits of story that Godfather Drosselmeir had delivered to her, in between the gallops and twirls of that last dance. Clara was trying to make sense of something that made no sense at all, for she had deduced that yes, indeed, Godfather firmly said and even more firmly believed, that the very Nutcracker that she

held in her arms was her dear, dear friend, Franz. She went over the story again in her mind. Yes, she was sure that is what he said.

She wasn't really sure she believed the story, but she was convinced that Drosselmeir did.

Clara tried parsing out the rest of the information thrown at her during that dance, but there was so much that made no sense at all. Mice – and nuts and sweets and princesses – were all thrown together like a fruit salad. It was all a jumble and difficult to separate out completely. But she did get a sense of magic spells and danger. And once again, she was firmly convinced that Drosselmeir had warned her of danger and urged her to take care of the Nutcracker. Reviewing everything once more, she was sure Drosselmeir had been afraid.

She really didn't know what to be afraid of, but she was convinced that Drosselmeir did.

So, whether I believe it or not, Clara thought, this Nutcracker – in Drosselmeir's eyes – is Franz. And, whether I believe it or not, Drosselmeir brought him to me to protect.

And as Clara continued to puzzle over this bit of information, she realized ... that someone would place the protection of someone he loved, only with someone he trusted – and preferably, with someone who *loved* that particular someone, who needed protection. Which meant that, her Godfather had known all along, even before she did, that she – Clara – loved Franz.

She really didn't know what to think about that, but she was convinced that Drosselmeir did.

Clara concluded that Drosselmeir knew that her love could protect Franz. And if this Nutcracker truly was Franz, and Franz truly was under a spell – for how else would a living, breathing boy become a toy – then she, Clara, must do something about it.

She really didn't know what to do about it, but she was convinced that Drosselmeir did.

And with that thought, Clara did what one must NEVER do when listening to one of the rants of Mother Stahlbaum – she took her eyes off of her mama to look into the eyes of the Nutcracker. All her doubts and questions and disbelief spoke to the wooden doll in her hands, and she felt the wood warm in her arms – and thought she saw the trace of a tear on its wooden face.

But it was all short-lived.

For Mother Stahlbaum went from fury to furious, and in the wink of an eye, grabbed the Nutcracker from Clara's arms, threw him into the curio cabinet, locked the door and pocketed the key! Clara looked at the curio cabinet in disbelief, as her mother stalked away from her, to the stairs. Here she was, not fifteen minutes from being told to protect the Nutcracker, and she had already lost him!

"Marie!" Mother Stahlbaum's tone was NOT one to ignore or disobey.

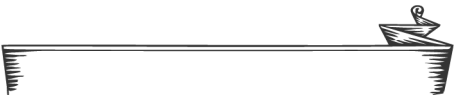
Clara quickly followed her up the stairs and to her room. At the door, Mother Stahlbaum looked at her sternly.

"Marie – it is time you grew up. Tomorrow all your toys – and I do mean all – will be given to the poor children in the orphanage." Holding up a hand at Clara's protest, Mother Stahlbaum continued, "And since you desire no match, no husband and no home of your own, you shall take on the task of managing mine – under my careful eye, of course. By five a.m. tomorrow, I shall expect my room warmed, and my tea hot. Good night."

Clara gulped, as her bedroom door shut in upon her. She knew Mother Stahlbaum always did what she said she would. And Clara knew that now she would be even *more* under the tyranny of time, than ever before. But worse, much worse than her life to be, was the fact that she had failed her Godfather, even more than if she had thrown the Nutcracker over the balcony herself! For the Nutcracker was doomed, with all the rest of her toys in the curio cabinet, to suffer at the hands of a ravenous throng of toy-starved orphans! Not that she begrudged the


children her toys. They had been gathering dust in that cabinet for too long. But she must save the Nutcracker!

Clara knew what she must do, and she was convinced that she would do it.



CHAPTER 40

Going About Her Business



As is often the case when you're itching to start something and need to get going, Clara had to wait for someone else. First, it was Mother Stahlbaum issuing orders to the maids, and then complaining to Father Stahlbaum about their horrible daughter.

Or so Clara imagined – for she could hear the murmur of her parents' voices as they walked to their room. Or rather, she could hear her mother's voice droning on and on – as her father made his nightly rounds of resetting the clocks in the house – and his indecipherable mutter, as he stopped at each clock and complained about the abominable timepieces in their household, before resetting the time and moving on to the next piece. Tonight, his journey through the house was punctuated by his wife's steady monologue of what Clara could only imagine was a list of her shortcomings. Clock and child were lumped together as something needing fixed, but with no repairs in sight.

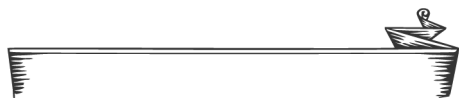
And so, father and mother – highly dis-satisfied over the state of affairs and even more dis-gruntled with the lack of a solution – at last, closed their door. And their grumbling was confined within the privacy of their suite. Not that that kept Clara from hearing, or rather re-hearing, the bitterness in her mother's voice, nor the exasperation in her father's. Neither did it keep her from feeling guilty.

After all, she *had* sabotaged the clocks on purpose. Fortunately for Clara, she felt NO guilt about rejecting the sorry excuse of a prince her

mother had wanted to marry her off to! This reminder – of the really, really, bad choice her mom had wanted to foist off on her – saved Clara from drowning in the “I’m a bad daughter” pool of regret. *After all, I have some say over my life, even if my say turns me into a housekeeper!*

Pushing the thoughts of parent/child relations from her mind, Clara listened impatiently, as the maids finished their cleaning-up. She really didn’t hear much cleaning-up going on, she realized. Opening her door just a crack, she thought what she heard sounded very much like a party. Sneaking across the hall and staring down into the ballroom, she realized that was exactly what was going on! The house servants and hired help were serving, and helping themselves, to the remains of the feast.

This could take hours, Clara thought with dismay, *and it’s already so very, very late*. Discouraged and suddenly tired from all the emotions of the night, Clara sank down to the carpet and pressed her forehead onto the rails of the balcony, thinking she might as well sit while she watched and waited. And she really did mean to watch, but – as it happens so often, just when we need to stay awake the most – Clara couldn’t keep her eyes open. First her eyelids would droop and she would shake her head. Then they would close completely, and her head would loll to one side, and she would wake with a start. Until finally, she fell totally asleep.



CHAPTER 41

Somewhere in Time



Reggie, in the meantime, was stuck somewhere in time – literally. He was in the clock, and in a dither! He was overjoyed to be a mouse again and *away* from people or at least, away from that girl. Now the mother of the girl hadn't been half bad. But for the life of him, the proximity to *so many people* had just about given him fits, half the night. And now, here he was – furry, snouted and with eyes like coal, glowing red around the edges. And life was once again good, *except* he still had to face his mother, with no Nutcracker – and not even with the ravaged remains of the Nutcracker – as he had been told to do.

He didn't know if he should go back to Mummy, or not. Actually, he knew, absolutely, in all certainty, no-doubt-about-it, that there was no way in the world he was going back to Mummy – not without PROOF. And that blasted girl had the proof! Reggie knew he had nowhere else to go. For how could a four-foot mouse hope to escape notice in a well-run household? *I mean*, he thought, *even humans aren't THAT blind*.

And so, Reggie dithered and dallied and duped himself into believing – that doing nothing – was the best plan of action.

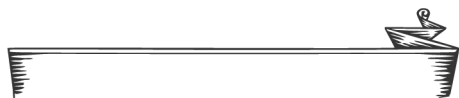
Now, it is universally known that most Mothers know *almost nothing* about their children. But even the worst Mothers know *something*. For most children, the fact that their mothers know *anything* is gener-

ally cause for consternation. But when their mothers know *something*, it is astounding.

And so it was for Reggie. He lay curled in a tight ball on the floor of the clock – passing the time by turning his head back and forth with the pendulum, and singing a “tick-tock” song in his head, and allowing himself to be hypnotized by repetition, stillness and not-thinking. As he lay in a half-stupor (which if he only realized, was his *modus operandi* – which is a fancy way of saying ‘habit’) – he realized he heard the scamper and stomp of a dozen mousey feet.

For what Reggie didn’t realize was that even his Mother, the worst mother of all, knew *something* about her son.

And what she knew was that he was worthless when things went wrong. And so, just in case things had gone wrong, the Mouse Queen had sent Reggie reinforcements. And these reinforcements now spilled into the clock, stomping and tromping all over Reggie. And as soon as Reggie could get the reinforcements off his chest – and arms, and stomach, and draw a deep breath – Reggie squeaked out a surprised YELP of happiness. For he knew these were the biggest bullies in the pack, and with them protecting him – he could take any doll away from a mere girl.



CHAPTER 42

A Head Swelling of a Good Time



The euphoria of reinforcements added to Reggie's short-lived – but long-remembered – satisfaction from Mother Stahlbaum's gushing admiration, and to his already-swollen head. He was feeling pretty good about himself. In fact, he was feeling much, much too good about himself. His small-man complex had quickly grown into Napoleonic visions of grandeur, and he was well on the way to seeing himself as the King of Mice. He was now certain he could lead his whiskery, furry army to conquer the world – as he knew it, anyways.

And with that thought, his head swelled even more.

Reggie, once convinced he could destroy the Nutcracker, began to think of better things. *If I had the Nutcracker*, he thought, *I could crack mummy's power. SHE would have to bow down to ME!*

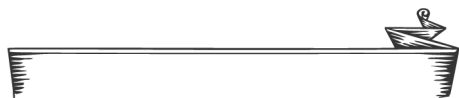
Let me redefine "better things," and instead, call Reggie's new thoughts "outrageous schemes and dastardly deeds." For it's apparent that Reggie is up to no good and maybe even thinking of matricide – in his dreams, if not in his actions.

And with that thought, his head swelled a little more.

Excited beyond belief, Reggie looked at all the pairs of beady little eyes waiting on his command, and he knew, yes, he knew, he was on his way to greatness. *If only they would bow down and worship me*, he thought, *then I could proclaim myself the One Great Rat!*

And with that final thought, his head swelled to almost bursting.

With a flourish of surprising grandeur and power, never seen in Reggie before – and so, even more-surprising to the half-mocking minions sent by his mummy – Reggie assumed command of his army, the very army that would take him to his rightful place as the Lord and King of All. Shocked into submission and respect, the meeslings quickly obeyed. And before they knew it, they were flooding into the dark Stahlbaum household, in pursuit of the Nutcracker.



CHAPTER 43

Don't Leave Me!



Clara was in the absolute grip of a nightmare. A crazed Godfather Drosselmeir swayed on top of the clock on the landing, calling her name. He frightened her. He frightened her even more, when he leaned over and stretched out his long, skinny hands. *Why have I never noticed how claw-like they were?* Clara thought, as Godfather leaned down and reached for the clock door, “No! No!” she moaned, again and again.

She was afraid!

Afraid of her own Godfather. Afraid of what was behind those doors. Afraid she'd never wake. Afraid she'd never see Franz. “No!” she moaned again, but it was too late, Godfather had pulled the doors back. It took forever for those doors to open, so slowly did he pull them back. But it was much too fast for Clara. She flung out her arms in her dreams, trying to push back those doors. She didn't want to see what was behind. The very thought terrified her.

She was so afraid!

Clara shuddered once, twice, then moaned again as the doors opened all the way – and the black void inside sucked all the warmth from her body. It was so black and so cold. Why had Godfather ever opened those doors? Clara now reached out to Godfather, afraid of being left alone with that black hole, pulling at her. But to her dismay, Godfather climbed off the clock and walked straight into that void.

“Don’t leave me!” she cried. “Don’t leave me!”

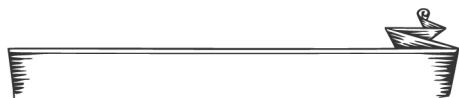
Where was he going? How could he leave her here, all alone – with that black hole waiting to take her? “Don’t go – don’t leave me!”

She was so very afraid!

And, as it is in all nightmares, Clara’s quickly went from bad, to worse. For she saw from within the bowels of the black void, beady, red-black eyes blinking and staring out at her. *If only I could scream*, she thought. *If only I could scream!*

When the beady, red-black eyes multiplied, Clara knew she’d scream, but she could only moan – as her fear increased and she began to tremble. And then scream she did – as ugly, yellow teeth, with even uglier yellow fangs, stretched out below the beady eyes into the ugliest yellow sneers Clara had ever seen! And those eyes and those sneers were coming out of the clock, after her.

She was so very, very afraid!



CHAPTER 44

Cold Showers and Rude Awakenings



Fortunately, it's the scariest part of nightmares that wake you up the moment before the culmination of what you fear might happen – happens. We wake up before we hit the ground after we've fallen off the cliff, before the train hits us as it's roaring down the tracks, and before the monster reaches out and grabs us as we run for our lives. We wake up – with a start and in a cold sweat, to be sure – but we wake up, look around wildly, and see we're safe in bed. The only danger around is the sheet wrapped tight around our legs. We then either high-tail it out of our rooms in search of human companionship, or we lie on our backs, breathing hard until we calm down. Then we uneasily laugh at our fears, switch on the light just in case, then eventually fall back asleep with the light blazing on our eyelids and helping us to dream of sunlit beaches and apple orchards.

Or so we hope.

Sometimes, the nightmares come back – and we must start the process all over again. Wake up, wild moment of disorientation, recognition, consternation that it was all a dream, then relaxation as we let it go.

Or so we hope.

Sometimes, this goes on all night – making you wish you'd never eaten that cold pizza and cookie-dough ice cream as a bedtime snack. And after the third or fourth time waking up in a cold sweat – you're

likely to hurl the empty ice cream carton across the room and swear off the cookie dough and promise to switch to the lite plain vanilla AND to quit the late-night sneaking of snacks from the kitchen.

Or so your mother hopes.

Then there's the other kind of dream. The worst of the worst of the worst. If you've ever had one – you know what I mean. The “other” is the dream that won't let you wake up, or shall I say, wake fully. It's the type of dream where you dream you wake up and a dark figure is at the foot of your bed and he's reaching out to drag you from the bed and – and the worst part is that you know this is a dream, so you tell yourself to wake up! But still, you dream he's reaching out to grab your foot and drag you away!

“Wake up!” you yell to yourself – but you don't wake up! Then you realize you *can't move* – you're frozen in bed. You know you're dreaming, you can't move and HE'S coming at you all the time. You struggle to just move your foot away from his hand and you can't do it! THEN you realize – you can't wake up, and the worst thing that could happen has happened. You can feel the clammy, scaly hand pulling on your foot – you try to scream out – but you can't. You try to wake – and you can't. And *he* begins to pull you off your bed. Then the true horror hits you – maybe you're awake – maybe this is really happening! You argue with yourself – no, it's only a dream – I'll wake up!

Or so you hope!

That's how Clara felt when she awoke with a start from her hiding place by the stairs. She couldn't move. Of course, this was because her legs and arms had fallen asleep from being hunkered down, hiding behind the stair rails. But she didn't realize that. All she knew was that she was paralyzed, and the thing she feared most in her dream was still happening. The door to the clock was opening!

The sight really and truly left her speechless! There was the dark void! And the eyes! And the ugly yellow sneers! But this time, she didn't wake up, and the sneers kept coming. Closer and closer. Clara

struggled to wake up. Closed her eyes and then just as quickly opened them again – but the eyes were still coming.

Worse still, the eyes were attached to giant mice, and they flooded into her house and down the stairs toward the cabinet where her mother had locked up the Nutcracker!

Clara told herself she was dreaming, felt the fear of not being able to wake up from her dream, and panicked and hyperventilated a little bit. This made her dizzy and she felt faint, which made her very angry – and it's the anger that saved her. Clara sprang to her feet. Franz was in trouble and she was going to save him!

Or so she hoped.



CHAPTER 45

The King of Mice



With anger powered by fear, Clara fled past the clock at the top of the landing, down the wide staircase, through a whole *herd of giant mice*, and flung herself in front of the curio cabinet. Feeling like a melodrama queen, with her arms stretched out to protect her love, Clara faced the ratty rowdies rushing toward her – and she realized the ridiculousness of her position.

Clara was barely five foot two, and all of the – well, we can't really call them meeslings anymore – these creatures, by their very exposure to Krakatuk, had achieved rat-hood-and-beyond. They towered over Clara, drool falling from their fangs; red-black eyes burning, with their claw-tipped paws dangling almost to the ground. If they had been kids, they would have been the schoolyard bullies; if they had been executioners, they would have been the gorillas in the black hoods carrying

the axes; if mobsters, the goons. But since they had been mice, they turned into ratty, goony, bullies – or Rabulgoonies, or Goobulratties, or some such really, really, scary, rat-like creatures.

And as Clara stared up at their ugly sneering faces, she thought she'd gag.

But once again, anger came to her rescue – and she screamed at them! And threw whatever books, candlesticks and knick-knacks that were at hand – the sort of things that one normally chucks at a mouse, and the sort of screams one normally screams when startled by a mouse – only ten times harder and ten times louder.

The Ratties went into immediate mouse-like defense mode and scattered to every nook and cranny possible, trying to slip into unseen-by-human-eyes mouse holes and into corners and under the furniture – the usual mousey bolt holes – but they were about six feet four inches too big, and there was a lot of upsetting of tables and bruising of snouts occurring in the general mayhem of escape. Clara lofted her last snow-globe at them, and as its resounding explosion and burst of water and snow sent the mice-at-heart scurrying farther away, she attacked the door to the curio cabinet in a desperate attempt to free the Nutcracker.

The lumps dealt by the usual-but-now-way-too-small bolt holes, and felt by the now-way-too-big-but-still-mouse-at-heart Ratties finally knocked some sense into the overgrown thugs. They regrouped and turned on Clara. In a slow and steady march, they surrounded her, cut off every hope of escape, and began a horrid and horrifying chant. It was in rat language, so Clara really couldn't understand what they were saying, but it scared her way more than her nightmares had ever done!

The chant took up a rhythm, and Clara could feel it sucking at her like the clock's black void in her nightmare. The more the Ratties chanted, the less air she could breathe in. Then the Ratties opened-up a gauntlet line that led from Clara and the toy cabinet, up the staircase, to the clock on the landing, and the dark, dark void beyond its door. And all the oxygen seemed to be swooshing up into that black hole.

Clara now clung to the curio cabinet, whispering Franz's name over and over. Black spots whirled around in her brain from the lack of oxygen and just as her knees began to buckle, the chant morphed into a proclamation for "The King of Mice, the Most High Rat, the One Rat to Rule Them All, the One Great Rat!"

And then she saw him.

At first, all she saw were the red-black eyes and yellow sneer. Then Clara realized there were no fangs and the eyes and sneer were very low to the ground. *Why, this King of Mice was shorter than me!* And when he stepped out of the clock, Clara blinked twice and was convinced she was still dreaming.

The King of Mice was the spitting image of Prince Reginald Rhatt, except maybe he had more fur and a swollen head. But Clara would have known him anywhere. This imposter was none other than her mother's Prince! His fussy lace and velvet coat and six curled-handlebar moustaches gave him away.

But why? she thought. *Why would he pretend to be the King of Mice?* Then Clara thought again. *Maybe he was the King of Mice pretending to be a Princely Man? But why would a mouse pretend to be a man?* Then Clara remembered Drosselmeir's warning of danger, and the mixed-up, muddled, tale of mice, and candy, and nuts, and Franz.

It was all true!

She didn't know how, but she knew in her heart of hearts that the Nutcracker inside the curio cabinet was Franz. *Just as Godfather had claimed!* Clara barely had time to register this earth-shattering conviction when she noticed the Ratties were closing in, pressing closer as that – that – mouse in man's clothing minced his way toward her. Then in a panic, she realized the Ratties were pushing her *away* from the cabinet and away from the Nutcracker. And with a sudden plunging feeling in her stomach, Clara realized the entire night had *nothing* to do with her, but it had *everything* to do with the Nutcracker.

Franz! Franz was in danger!

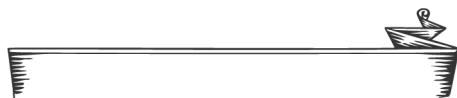
Clara fought her way back to the curio door, just as Reggie reached it. Having already thrown everything in reach at the Ratties, Clara yanked off her shoe and threw it at Reggie. Reggie yelped, dove for the floor, and quivered uncontrollably. However, the Ratties had learned their lesson well and were unfazed by any flying objects, unidentified or otherwise. They pressed in on Clara and held her tight.

A couple of them helped Reggie up, and he regained his swagger as he shook them off and yanked at the curio door – which of course, being locked, nearly pulled his arm out of the socket. Yowling in pain, Reggie turned on Clara – and bit her!

The shock was worse than the bite! Clara screamed out in surprise.

This gave Reggie great satisfaction, for he had learned the pleasures of power and was now falling under the corruption of causing pain to others. He was, at long last, turning into the Rattie he had always dreamed of being. In utter abandonment, Reggie welcomed the pain of fangs pushing their way through his gums. The pain and the blood made him feel bad, the badness of being a real live rat! He was so excited – he almost peed *his* pants (well, maybe he did, just a little).

And he turned to sneer at Clara with his brand new bloody fangs – as he opened them wide for one last bite!



CHAPTER 46

A Wooden Place, A Wooden Face



Inside the curio cabinet, a curious change was culminating. Franz could hear Clara whispering his name and for the first time since he'd bit the Magic Nut, Krakatuk, and been whacked on the floor by the Mouse Queen and turned into a wooden Nutcracker, Franz felt warm – and the warmth crept into his arms and spread into his legs.

From the very moment, he'd been turned from boy to toy, and even though he was nothing but a block of wood and stiffer than stiff could ever be, and even though Franz was locked deep inside a wooden place, behind a wooden face, Franz had seen everything – Drosselmeir's headlong rush through the clock tunnel, the boys searching, searching, searching to find the Nutcracker, the shock of Clara holding him at last but not recognizing him, and the final plunge off the balcony to the marble floor, below.

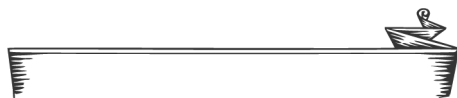
Even though the crash had broken his jaw and hurt beyond belief, it did two things for Franz. And both things brought Franz hope. First, the pain told Franz he was still human, even if he was cursed and made of wood. The second, the broken jaw, got him back into Clara's arms, which he realized with surprise, *is where I want to be*. He thought that confirmed he had a heart, even though he was a dumb old toy and an even dumber old boy – for hadn't he just been thinking earlier that day that it was too bad Clara was a girl? Now, he realized he was Glad-with-a-capital-G that Clara was a girl. And if his heart felt love, yep, l-o-v-e,

for her – even though she was a girl – then he must be really, truly alive. For a doll couldn't feel love, and that meant he must somehow, really, truly have remained a boy. Or maybe he was turning into a man – 'cause everyone knows boys don't like girls. And here he was, wishing he was back in Clara's arms and dreaming of – well, not hearts and flowers, but at least, really cool hours spent with her, making contraptions and inventing even cooler stuff than ever before.

All these thoughts swept through Franz's mind like the earlier, before-mentioned fiery pinpricks of chilblain pain, which is what drove these thoughts of love from Franz's mind. Because the red-hot needles of expansion were upon him, as he grew and grew and grew inside the curio cabinet. All the shelves above him were shoved out of the way, as Clara's dolls and toys showered down around his ankles. Then when his head hit the top of the cabinet, his feet ripped through the two shelves beneath him and crushed all her marzipan treasures and made an un-repairable mess of Mother Stalhbaum's favorite piece of furniture.

Just as the fire of his fast-growing limbs blinded Franz, he heard Clara cry out his name in pain! Not once, but twice! Clara was calling for him and SHE was in pain – which made Franz forget all about his own pain, and frantic to get out of the curio cabinet.

But the door wouldn't budge!



CHAPTER 47

Reggie, Ratties and a Right Cross



We must remember that Franz was locked inside a curio cabinet, and the curio cabinet being of strong, German construction, was not that easy to break out of, as Franz was trying to do. Nor was it that easy to break into, as Reggie was attempting to do.

Which is why Reggie had taken his frustrations out on Clara.

What Franz had – that Reggie didn't have – was a heart of gold. And a wooden head. For although Clara's calls had broken the spell and returned him to normal size, the spell was only partially broken, and had left Franz still trapped inside the wooden head of a Nutcracker – which came in quite handy when trying to break out of a particularly well-made piece of cabinetry. Franz simply needed to use his head, which he did – over and over again, banging it against the cabinet door and first denting, then splintering the wood and finally, tearing the frame from its hinges.

Such a ruckus broke through even Reggie's sadistic enjoyment of drawing his first blood. Reggie turned, more in irritation than anything else, only to whimper in fear and freeze in fright at the sight of a six-foot-plus Nutcracker pushing its way out of the curio cabinet. Never, in Reggie's wildest dreams, would he have imagined this outcome! He had felt incredible and invincible – but after one look at the Nutcracker's giant jaws, he wished only to be invisible and inedible! So Reggie

did the only thing he knew how to do – and that was to grab Clara and put someone else between him, and harm’s way.

The Ratties were of less timid persuasion. They charged the Nutcracker, hoping for safety in numbers, but soon realized HIS teeth were much more powerful and larger than THEIR teeth, which individually was a setback. But as a whole, should not have been a problem. BUT, Ratties, for all their size, are after all, nothing more than overgrown and particularly nasty mice – and so they were much more inclined to scatter when their first rush failed to work.

The fact that most Nutcrackers come equipped with swords did not encourage their remaining around for long. For this Nutcracker was no longer a toy-sized Nutcracker with a toy-sized sword. No! This Nutcracker was a man-sized Nutcracker with a man-sized sword and, lest we forget, OVERGROWN JAWS SO BIG as to convince the Ratties that a hasty retreat was wise. And besides, they thought, a fat mouse in a far-away land is better than a poke in the pants.

And off they ran.

Leaving poor Reggie all alone.

The point, of which, he soon became aware. The news, about which, he was not happy. The fact, of which, he faced like the rat he had become. Reggie, as he hid behind Clara, became aware of her hair parting and exposing her lovely white neck. And in the dim recesses of his mind, he remembered the words his mama said, “When you’re alone, bite her on the neck.” Which Reggie attempted to do.

But before his fangs broke her skin, Clara felt his intention. After all, she’d been worried all night about her neck, around Reggie. And her other shoe was already in her hand. So she swung out and she swung around – and blindly swatted at the “feeling” more than the mouse.

But she connected.

And she connected hard. All that momentum and fear had put a lot of centrifugal force into her arm with the apex of energy in her fist, which tightly gripped her shoe. And like a baseball bat bashing down

on a beach ball – both hand and shoe sunk into Reggie’s swollen head. For those of you who know anything about science and anything about theories, you’ll know that “any action results in an opposite and equal reaction,” which immediately happened, in this case.

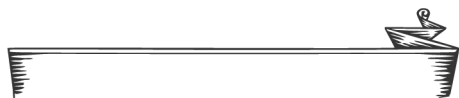
Reggie was knocked up the stairs and into the clock. (If we were making bad jokes, we’d say Clara really clocked him one. But we won’t.) Reggie’s poor swollen head shrunk to the size of a dime and disappeared between his shoulders. Or so it seemed. And as he skidded into the clock, he knocked down 9 of the 10 fleeing Ratties, who were so scared that they scooped him up and fled down the tunnel, carrying Reggie’s pitiful headless body over their heads.

And if you’re feeling sorry for Reggie, who went from being bullied to being a bully, you should stop and take a look at Clara. She’s in shock. She’s feeling far, far worse than anyone who has set a trap for a mouse for the first time, only to discover the brutality of a mousetrap.

Clara had only wanted to keep from being bitten. It was going to take a lot of time and a lot of counseling before she could ever make sense of the last five minutes of her life. But at that particular moment, she was in pure shock.

Fortunately, this is a fairy-tale, and so when awful things happen they are always followed by a PURPOSE. And so it was for Clara. She looked up to see her childhood friend, still under an enchantment and looking to her for help.

And she knew she must continue on – whatever “on” might be.



CHAPTER 48

Out of the Fog and Into the Clock



Have you ever walked through a really, really, thick fog? A fog where you feel like your own private, fluffy pillow surrounds you, that follows you around everywhere? And as you walk, you might see the forms and shadows of bushes and trees and even other people, but they all remain beyond the borders of your own personal fogbank? All you can see is gray mist and shadows.

Except for your very own self – you remain in perfect clarity, visually that is. But there’s doubt in every glance, like – is that hand really my hand? Or, does my leg really look that way? Or, are my feet really touching the sidewalk? It’s like the fog is inside your head. And you’ve got another personal fogbank in your mind that separates your physical body from your brain. So, while your brain is thinking all these thoughts and looking at yourself from the inside, there is a mist, a cloud, a separation between the “you inside, looking around” and the “you outside, walking around.”

Truthfully, I’m always rather glad at that particular moment to be in the fog, where no one else can see me, because I’m sure I look like a dope – as the “me inside” looks at the “me outside” like it’s the first time either one of us have met.

Our heroes, Clara and Franz, stared at each other in that very same dopey, dumb, dithery way. Each felt a little like they were surrounded by fog, covered in cotton balls or stumbling around in the dark just be-

fore dawn. Everything looked dim and fuzzy, but the light was growing stronger and they were seeing better, bit-by-bit.

And they were seeing each other for the first time, in a long time. And to say the least, they each looked different. Although, I think we've got to give Clara points for the biggest shock. After all, Franz did have a giant wooden head with oversized jaws and a long beard! Not exactly the boyfriend any of us would daydream over.

And all of this – after she had just killed a giant mouse!

So, her fog was rather deep and she felt exceedingly dopey and pretty much could only stand there with her mouth open. But at least she wasn't drooling.

Which Franz wouldn't have noticed, anyway.

For Franz was reveling in what a difference a year could make in a girl of fifteen. No, Clara was – sixteen! (And you boys know what I mean.)

It wasn't shyness that kept them apart, or unfamiliarity. For oddly enough, both felt an even stronger tie, a greater affection, and a joint purpose than ever before. For now, it was hugely clear what they had to do. And getting rid of a giant wooden head was top on their list!

Things that are inside your head, most often need to be said. Not always, mind you. You don't want to go about blathering, every time you think someone has B.O. or a pimple on their nose. But we're always being told to share our feelings – which is always easier said than done!

And so it was, with Clara and Franz.

A year of longing wrapped into one little bitty moment – and no one could think of a single thing to say. For a long while. Nothing. Just staring. No drooling on Clara's part, yet. But she was in danger – the saliva was forming little pools under her tongue. So, she swallowed hard. So did Franz, but it was rather grotesque and loud.

That's when the shuffle-your-feet, odd-sort-of-feeling started.

Fortunately, Franz whispered a gruff "Thanks," and they woke up from their dreamlike state, blinked a bit, and moved on.

“She almost married me off to that rat! And all this time – all my life – I’ve been tyrannized by their time and their rules!”

“I thought you’d never see me.”

“I thought I’d never wake up from that nightmare of a party.”

And on and on they went, talking from their own viewpoints and sometimes jumbling up on top of each other about their own separate messes – until at last, the messes merged. And they stopped and asked together at the same time: “So, what do we do now?”

And that’s when the clock started chiming. And although Clara cringed for the slightest bit, she was the one to take Franz’s hand. “We have to find Godfather.”

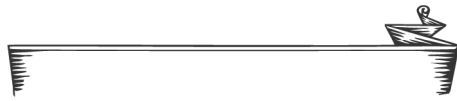
And Franz took her other hand, “We have to free the land.”

To which Clara looked puzzled. “What land?” But she walked with him toward the clock, anyway.

To which Franz replied, “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you on the way.”

Clara only hesitated for a moment, before stepping into the clock, and from the recesses of its innards, her last question echoed back into the landing: “This doesn’t have anything to do with MICE – does it?”





CHAPTER 49

Shivering and Shaking



Meanwhile, back at the ranch – or Land of Sweets in our case – the Mouse Queen’s snow continued to fall, until the entire realm was hip-deep in ice and snow and very, very cold. All the Sweeties had escaped to the Christmas Tree Forest.

Mother Ginger had posted the Gingerbread Men to guard their hiding place, for hiding place they had. And no longer did the Sweeties live in the Castle, for the Castle was overrun with mice, and their Princess was a troll. So, they had decamped to the woods and built a makeshift camp from toffee bark, tied together with licorice whips.

And so, Mother Ginger had posted guards – not that any mouse was going to leave the comfort of the nice warm Castle, with plenty of candy to munch, to come out into the freeze-your-tails-off cold. But she was a responsible person, and responsible persons (and boy scouts!) are always prepared.

Personally, the Gingerbread Men, as they shivered and shook, thought Mother Ginger was perhaps a bit overly zealous. For they were in the middle of what seemed to be

a month-long snowstorm and who - they thought, as their teeth chattered a telegraph message about how cold it was – who would come out, on a night like this?

Who indeed?

For just as the Gingerbread Men were shivering and shaking their bitterly, cold complaints about the uselessness of standing guard – and doesn't it always happen this way – someone appeared deep in the trees, slogging their way through the snow.

Who could it be?

Fearing the sharp teeth of the oversized mice that had run them from their Castle, the Gingerbread Men drew closer together. *Quick!* They all thought, *We must run, run, run as fast as we can to tell Mother Ginger!* But they were all frozen to the spots where they stood. And this time, it wasn't the cold that had them shivering and shaking. It was fear.

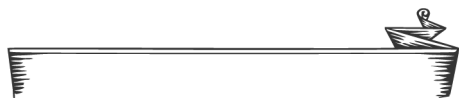
Who was coming?

The harder the Gingerbread Men looked through the trees, the deeper the shadows seemed to grow. The more they tried to see through the snow, the thicker it seemed to blow. And yet whoever – or whatever – it was, was coming nearer and nearer. The Gingerbread Men felt like they could melt from terror – but they were frozen through and through, as the shadow came closer, and closer.

Who was it?

Finally, out of total fear and the total stupidity which fear brings on, the Gingerbread Men shut their eyes tight, so they couldn't see whoever – or whatever – come any closer.

And that's when it happened.



CHAPTER 50

Drosselmeir's Return



Where am I? was Drosselmeir's first thought. *This place is freezing cold and is covered in snow. It bears no resemblance to the Land of Sweets.* He scooped up some snow and tasted it – bleh! It was nasty! No spun sugar, this, and no natural snow, either, like back home in Hamelin. It tasted like mouse droppings, he realized – cursed snow, straight from the Mouse Queen herself!

And he, Drosselmeir, had just had a mouthful.

He was in the middle of the very undignified act of spitting and hacking up a gut turned sour by the thought of mouse poop, when he noticed the small group of ragtag Gingerbread Men, frozen stiff with eyes squeezed tight. Drosselmeir gave one last spat into a snowdrift and ran toward the pathetic pack of petrified poppets.

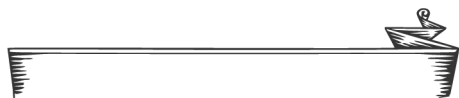
The Gingerbread Men heard him coming. Their hearts pounded, their blood raced, and their breathing sped up, until little puffs of hot mist formed clouds around their heads.

Drosselmeir stared at the fogbank formed by their fear. *They're alive*, he thought, and dropped to his knees beside the shivering and shaking Gingerbread Men.

"It's me! Drosselmeir! I'm back!" Drosselmeir wanted to gather them in his arms and hug them tight, but he was afraid they would shatter if he tried to touch them.

First one, then another, snuck a peek – then jubilation, and a rushing of little Sweeties into the arms of the man, who, they'd always felt was weird and a bit scary, but who now equaled home and happiness, and a life for which they longed. The Sweeties were remembering Hamelin, and with Hamelin they were remembering their parents, and life before a diet of pure sugar.

They almost longed for fried liver. At least, it would be hot.



CHAPTER 51

When the Queen Discovers No Head



Hold onto your hats because we're back in the clock – this time with the Ratties who'd turned tail and run from Clara, leaving Reggie to head off her wrath, and her shoe, alone. And with the whack she'd given him, the meaning of “head off” became quite clear, for the running Ratties were whacked from behind by little Reggie's body – *sans* head – sliding through the clock door and slamming into the back of their legs.

(*Sans* is French for something “without” – like “without a head.” How scary is that?)

Untangling themselves from each other's tails and smells – for a tight space like the inside of a clock, certainly was telling as to who had washed recently or had cabbage for dinner – the Ratties shoved Reggie around like a pin-ball, until first one – then the next and then all – noticed he was missing his head. Then, their pin-ball action went into a hyper-hot-potato-pass action, as each Rattie pushed away little Reggie (smaller by a head than his earlier short-stuff) from mouse to mouse, as they all lost their heads – figuratively, not literally. Although factually, their functionality was blatantly incapacitated – and incapacitated means headless, if you follow its Latin roots back to “capo” which does mean head, and “in” which is negative. So you could say incapacitated means *sans* head. And I seem to have lost my own at this moment. So sorry.)

Back to the Ratties tossing Reggie ‘round – and the whole pinball-machine mess hit “tilt,” as the Ratties came face to face with their biggest fear, which was not a headless Reggie, but The Question. And The Question they all feared was: What happens when the Queen discovers no head?

The Answer to The Question, the Ratties all decided was, “We’re dead!”

This is what lay so heavy on their shoulders as they carried Reggie’s body through the clock tunnel. (It wasn’t Reggie who was heavy. The biggest thing about Reggie was his head, remember?)

Their Answer to The Question – namely being, “We’re dead!” – lay heavy on their shoulders, as they reached the Land of Sweet’s door of the Clock.

The Answer to The Question, “We’re dead!” lay heavy on their shoulders when, after a half hour of dithering at the inside of the door of the Clock, they finally opened it and stepped out into the snowdrift of the Christmas Tree Forest.

The Answer to The Question, “We’re dead!” lay heavy on their shoulders as they plowed through the snow.

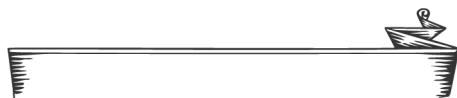
The Answer to The Question, “We’re dead!” lay heavy on their shoulders, as they trudged past the terrified and troubled Gingerbread Men and Drosselmeir. (The Ratties were so worried that they didn’t even take notice!)

The Answer to The Question, “We’re dead!” lay heavy on their shoulders, as they approached the half-eaten and crumbling Castle walls.

The Answer to The Question, “We’re dead!” lay heavy on their shoulders, as they climbed the stairs to the throne room.

And the Answer to The Question, “We’re dead!” rained down on *their* heads, as they high-tailed it down the stairs, out of the Castle, and into the snow – chased by the Mouse Queen shooting bright bolts of lightning at their backsides.





CHAPTER 52

A Wizard's Duel



In every life, we all face a battle we must fight. Some battles are the nasty physical sort of fight, where noses are bloodied and pride is wounded. Others are verbal duels, where words, and tempers, carve scars into our very souls. Still worse are the internal battles, where you pit yourself against yourself, and neither one of you wins.

Drosselmeir had already beat himself up pretty badly for what had happened to Franz, and now he was faced with the poor children of Hamelin, (i.e., the Sweeties), being stuck in the snow. And he had already boxed himself silly over piping them *into* the Land of Sweets in the first place. And although it's every child's dream to be stuck in a veritable candy land, no adult would feel comfortable about letting children rot their teeth or turn their brains to mush. And that was certainly what was happening to the Sweeties. They were sweet, yes, but also incredibly silly, and growing sillier every day. *And*, thought Drosselmeir, as he surveyed all the Sweeties and Mother Ginger who had come out of hiding, so very happy to see him, *here they are, stuck in a freezing wasteland, with no sugar daddy – just a mean mother mouse.*

So, yes, poor Godfather Drosselmeir was ruining the day he'd every agreed to be a mouse-catcher, and twice guessing what he should have, would have, could have done.

It was that kind of internal battle.

But there is another battle, a terribly awesome different sort of fight, the type where you must take a stand for good, and against evil, a time to go *mano a mano* to protect those who are in danger.

And it was barreling full-speed and hot-as-hate into the woods, straight toward the unsuspecting Sweeties and Drosselmeir.

For, yes – indeed-y, the Mouse Queen had chased the poor Ratties completely into the woods, and had left a trail of metal windup mice behind, as she whacked first one, and then another, with Krakatuk. And each missed whack had sent out a flash of ice-cold white lightning, until the woods were in danger of never thawing.

The remaining Ratties swung around trees and dove through snow-drifts. They slid down hills and tripped and fell, then got up and ran for their lives – only to be snared by bushes that slowed them down to a crawl. All in all, they were scared out of their wits and screaming at the top of their lungs.

And it was those screams that saved the Sweeties.

No sooner had Drosselmeir heard the screams than he shoved the Sweeties aside – as the Ratties pummeled down the path, trampling any and all before them. Sad to say, that left Drosselmeir smack-dab in the middle of the path. And, while he was able to hold his own against a group of wanna-get-out-of-here-and-fast Ratties, the spinning and jostling he took left him totally unprepared for the Mouse Queen, coming around the corner – especially a white-hot Mouse Queen, wielding a Magic Nut.

Even as Drosselmeir snatched out his Pipe, he knew it was too late. Before he could draw breath, the Mouse Queen swung with all her might. Before he could purse his lips, the Krakatuk came crashing down upon his head.

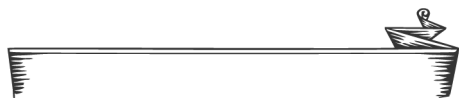
And that brings us to the last kind of fight – the ones that are over before you know they started.

And it also answers the question asked so long ago – what curse comes to a clock-maker and wizard when the blow finally falls?

All the Sweeties now knew.

And Mother Ginger knew.

And the Mouse Queen certainly knew, and did she ever gloat – as she lifted her trophy into the air and laughed, and laughed, and laughed again.



CHAPTER 53

Where Have All the Flowers Gone?



Change is never easy, except when it's a change for the better. And sometimes, even then, we are upset just because things aren't what we're used to. But when change is for the worse, we get downright angry. And when change is both for the worse *and* unexpected, we can be forgiven for being both angry and scared – and a heap more, if you ask me.

So, when Franz – who already had undergone more changes than most of us will in four lifetimes (wooden head, etc.) – rushed out the back door of the Clock, expecting to be in the Throne Room, only to discover himself in a wilderness of ice and snow, he was more than surprised, or angry, or scared. He was flabbergasted.

(Such a lovely word – flabbergasted. It means “to amaze, astonish, astound, bowl over, dumbfound, surprise, floor, rock, shock, startle, stun, stupefy, befuddle, bewilder, blindside, blow away, confound, confuse, daze, discomfit, disconcert, dismay, jar, muddle, nonplus, perplex, and shake up.”)

So there was Franz – our life-sized Nutcracker – thunderstruck and dumbfounded to the point where all he could say to Clara's worried questions was something thunderously dumb. Of course, Clara wasn't surprised – as she had never been in, nor even known, that the Land of Sweets existed. And the only surprise she had was that the innards of a clock could hold another Land, rather than the cogs and bolts and nuts

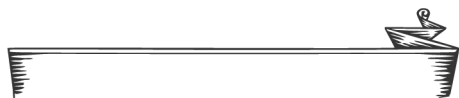
she usually dealt with. So her surprise was more of an “Oh, isn’t this interesting?” rather than a “Merciful God in Heaven!” sort of shock.

And all that Franz could say, once he could say anything, was “Where are the flowers?” which made no sense to Clara, who could plainly see that the snow was hip-deep. And Clara thought Franz made even less sense when he ran off into the forest, calling, “Sweeties!”

Let’s hope she can catch him and get him to explain the whole story. For let’s remember that Clara came through the Clock to the Land of Sweets purely out of love, and with very little understanding and even less explanation. So, what she thought she might see was Godfather Drosselmeir and the rest of the Hamelin children. And she also feared she might see some Mice, but she wasn’t sure.

So, her expectations were different, and that’s not the same thing as change. But it’s close.

So, both Franz and Clara were in a bit of a muddle, even as Clara ran after Franz. For even though he had that hideous Nutcracker head, she thought of him as Franz, which just goes to show how different she was from Pirlipat! So, as she ran – or ploughed – her way through the snow, she realized that Franz had been bowled over by all the snow, and that this particular change was *not* for the better.



CHAPTER 54

Blindsided by Snow



Too much light on snow can hurt your eyes and even cause you to go snow blind. Something happening unexpectedly is another form of blindness, called: being “blindsided.” That’s s-i-d-e, not s-i-g-h-t – although why anyone would choose to explain a lack of sight with the word “side” is beyond me. (Although someone did tell me football was involved.)

Anyway, Franz and Clara were about to be blindsided.

After the defeat of Drosselmeir, Mother Ginger and the Sweeties wisely disappeared deep into the woods, Mother Ginger having first posted Coffee (minus the caffeine fidgets) as sentry, to make sure they weren’t followed.

The Mouse Queen had no thoughts of following. She was celebrating the demise of her nemesis, the ruin of her enemy and the joy of revenge. She was also very happy to lie down on the sled pulled by her troll Princess – Pirlipat. The chase of the Ratties had been the most movement the Mouse Queen had attempted since sitting down on her troll’s (or rather Princess-under-a-curse’s) throne – and she was exhausted.

So, poor Princess Pirlipat (who was really upset by all the changes around her!) poor Princess Pirlipat trudged and nudged and grudged every inch, as she dragged the heavy sled with the even-heavier Mouse Queen through the snow.

“How did this ever come to be?” Pirlipat moaned, as she yanked the sled over a snowdrift, nearly upsetting, but not awakening, the snoring Mouse Queen. “How could I, a royal Princess, end up a ... a ... a common laborer!”

For even though the proof was visible to her very eyes, Pirlipat could not bear the thought of being ugly, let alone a troll. So she focused on something else. She had always been the apple of her Mama Stahlbaum’s eye, her daddy’s baby, and a proper Princess ruling the Land of Sweets. She blamed Drosselmeir for bringing the mice to the Land of Sweets. She blamed Franz for being turned into an ugly toy and not saving her. In fact, she blamed anyone and everyone, except herself.

Pirlipat felt she was a victim and that everyone had conspired against her. You could say she had been blindsided – but only because she was blind as a bat when it came to what mattered.

So, here was the Princess Troll, crying so hard she couldn’t see anything in front of her, dragging an extremely large mouse through the blinding snow.

And here were Franz and Clara – for Clara had caught up with him – and now their heads were huddled together, while Franz told the story as far as he knew it, but with no answers about the snow. Here they were, shuffling through the snow, toward the Castle, and hoping to find Drosselmeir around every tree. Instead, they shuffled right up, and nose-to-snotty-nose – with a *troll*!

Talk about being blindsided!

I can't tell you who was scared worse – the troll meeting the giant Nutcracker head on the body of a boy, or the giant Nutcracker head meeting the troll! Clara would have said the surprise was the biggest for her – for she hated the thought of catching a cold. And the sight of all that snot made her jump back two feet and stand shivering and shaking in the cold, afraid she might do just that – catch a cold.

You tell me – who had the worse shock?

Maybe it was the Mouse Queen, who had been sound asleep – when she was upset, into the snow, after the sled tipped over.



CHAPTER 55

There's Something Familiar Here



“Do I know you? You look familiar.”

Both Franz and Pirlipat – i.e., the Nutcracker and the Troll – were staring at each other in that unsure, “Do I know you?” sort of way. Both feeling like they should know the person in front of them, but at a total loss as to whom that person could be.

Finally, Pirlipat put it all together, as she should, because Franz had no idea the Princess had been turned into a troll. Whereas Pirlipat had seen Franz turned into a Nutcracker, right before her eyes. And even

though his head was ten times bigger than the last time she had seen it, it was still the same head and the same eyes and the same gi-normous jaws.

“Franz?”

Franz stared back like a block of wood. (Which he was.)

“Franz! Oh, Franz! It’s me, Princess Pirlipat!”

Franz double-timed a few hops backwards. And whether it was from a troll rushing at him with open arms, or the memory of Princess Pirlipat throwing herself at him day-after-day, we’ll never know. For a gentleman (such as Franz) never tells. Whatever the case, he had practiced the maneuver of side-stepping without offense so well, and for so long, that Princess Pirlipat never knew she’d been avoided – as his Nutcracker head went into so deep a bow that it threatened to topple the rest of Franz on his nose, and would have, if it had not been for Clara’s quick tug, to steady him.

Flattered by what she took as a courtly gesture, the Troll tittered, which was more than a little silly on a Princess and very wet on a troll – as trolls tend toward spit.

Clara, as she rounded around the round and oversized head of poor Franz, suddenly came into view of Pirlipat – which brought Pirlipat around to realizing just how troll-like she really was – because her half-sister was a sight that made her eyes sore. Pirlipat never liked having a sister. And especially not a pretty sister. And worse, yet, a nice sister.

Clara’s heart went out to Pirlipat – and Pirlipat wanted none of that! A pity party for Pirlipat was not pleasing. So Pirlipat pulled herself up to her full, three-and-a-half-foot troll size (although her shock of bright pink hair added another three feet). And as she pulled herself up, Pirlipat pulled herself back, so that Clara had no choice but to close her arms around air – and stare.

Clara’s eyes grew so big and her face grew so tight, that Pirlipat began to feel highly offended. But when Clara’s teeth began to chatter and her legs began to stumble back, Pirlipat almost (*almost!*) thought that

being scary might be as good as being pretty. But she quickly dismissed that thought when she saw Franz, too, was moving away and pointing at her. *How rude!* Pirlipat thought. *He's far uglier than I am!*

Pirlipat was entertaining rude thoughts of her own and would have made it all the way to mean thoughts – if the heavy breathing from behind her, and a dollop of snow down her neck had not switched her thoughts far away from Franz – and into the immediate knowledge that she had a seething and sopping sovereign, breathing down her neck.

Turning with utmost caution and sinking to her knees in the slush and snow, the Troll bowed low, fearing to look up, as she asked with absolute submission, “Yes, your Majesty?”

Mean and nasty, is bad. Mean and nasty waking up, is worse. Mean and nasty, waking up from a fall, flat-faced into a snowdrift, is the worst-est of all! That's when mean and nasty – goes awfully, awfully bad.

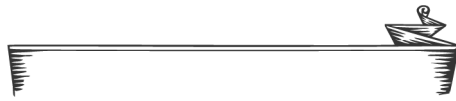
The Mouse Queen looked awfully, awfully bad as she towered over the Troll – and worse still, when she raised Krakatuk. At her command, her entire Rattie escort (the ones she hadn't already thumped into mechanical-mouse oblivion) rallied to her side. And at the thrust of Krakatuk toward the Nutcracker and Clara, the rat-wave crashed down, around, and on the two!

There was the normal amount of run-and-jump-and-chase that happens when two are mobbed by twenty – meaning the Nutcracker thrashed a lot. And it took a bit of mouse-power to grab his arms and legs, while staying out of reach of those out-of-proportion jaws. Clara was harder to catch. She slipped and skidded and made it to Pirlipat. But unfortunately for Clara – all traces of Pirlipat were gone, and only a groveling, whining Troll remained.

And the Troll traded Clara for favors, from a Fink.

And the Fink favored revenge.





CHAPTER 56

Judge, Juror and Executioner



Excited to have her last enemy in her control and wanting to show off a bit, the Mouse Queen – with the help of a half dozen Ratties – climbed onto her overturned sled and looked down on her prisoners. Assuming airs and using the sled as a judge’s box, the Mouse Queen addressed the impromptu court and the prisoners-on-trial. “You are charged with treason and attempted assassination of your gracious liege – me – your Royal Majesty, the Queen.”

Looking toward the other side of the sled, the Mouse Queen – as Judge – asked the empty space, “Does the Jury have a verdict?”

And sliding to that empty space, the Mouse Queen – as Jury – responded, “Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!”

Then, sliding back to the Judge’s side of the sled, the Mouse Queen – as Judge – announced, “Then by the power invested upon me, by myself, I sentence you to death by...” and leaning over the condemned, the Mouse Queen – as Executioner – deliberated ...

For the death sentence immediately presented a problem. What sort of execution should she carry out? Then she realized, here was her chance to have a bit of fun!

Sometimes villains are so unimaginative. Ever notice how when they finally have the good guys in their grasp and are ready to do-them-in, and then – oh wait! The villains stop and begin to twitter and wonder, “Why solve all my problems and get on with the business of being

bad – when I can enjoy a bit of nastiness before I wipe ‘em out?” And that, my friend, is the downfall of so many villains in so many stories. And why should the Mouse Queen be any smarter? In fact, despite all the sugar and spice this Queen consumed – there wasn’t anything nice about her, at all.

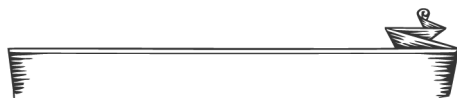
And now, because she wanted to crow a little (for what mouse doesn’t want a chance to crow rather than squeak?) the Mouse Queen had a fantasy moment, imagining all sorts of horrid things she could do to rid herself of the one threat to her power – and keep Krakatuk forever safe and under her control.

I do believe roasting over fires and popping into pies had a lot to do with her fantasies. For after all, the Mouse Queen was a mouse and a mousey fantasy is all about food. So for a while, visions of sugar-plummed parts danced in her head.

But reality sets in after all fantasies – and the Mouse Queen was faced with a set of toothsome realities – the teeth belonging to the Nutcracker.

For although the Mouse Queen wanted to thrash the Nutcracker into oblivion, she wasn’t exactly *thrilled* by the size of those jaws. She worried that even Krakatuk might break under the *psi* (pounds per square inch) that those chompers could deliver!

So, because she was a coward and wanted to stay away from the *jaws* of the Nutcracker, the Mouse Queen tarried – when she should have taken charge.



CHAPTER 57

What Coffee Almost Didn't See



Coffee, with no caffeine, lacks a bit in the energy department. And Coffee, without caffeine, soon fell asleep at her post of watching and waiting for the Mouse Queen to return. Fortunately, Coffee was a light sleeper. And even if she wasn't, all the noise made by a major sled upending a major mouse onto the forest floor – even if it was covered by snow – made a major amount of racket.

Coffee jolted out of her slumber with flailing arms, and caused a minor avalanche of snow to cascade down from the branches of the fir tree, where she'd slipped off to sleep. All this commotion might have been noticed by a horde of rodents – close by. Except that the mice were busy stomping and tromping on the Nutcracker and Clara. And the noise and confusion they made was much more than the noise and confusion that Coffee made.

So Coffee, wide awake now and completely alert to the danger, crept behind a bush to see what she could see, hear what she could hear and help where she could help.

And what Coffee saw was weird.

Giant ugly mice invading the Land of Sweets and led by an even uglier Queen Mouse (who was now twice as round as when Coffee had first seen her.) A Troll dressed up in the rags of a prom dress. A boy with the giant head of a Nutcracker and snapping jaws. And the weirdest of all – a girl. It had been a long time since any of the children of

Hamelin had seen an ordinary-looking girl, for they had all grown to look as sweet and silly as they acted. And here was Clara, fresh from home and with all the determination a good heart could hold.

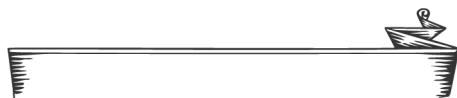
And Coffee knew she knew this new girl, but couldn't remember how. But she knew she needed to know.

And all during the Mouse Queen's ridiculous trial, Coffee had thought. And she thought, and she thought – until she finally dredged up a bit of Hamelin, and a dinner long ago at the Stahlbaum's. And Clara was there, and so was Pirlipat – which explained Clara. Then, as Coffee looked at the Troll's hair and dress, she realized it also explained the Troll, or Pirlipat.

So, who was the Nutcracker?

And then she remembered the clock – and having followed Drosselmeir and Franz through the clock into the Land of Sweets. Then afterwards, Franz always working on the clock – except when he was...? Oh yes. There it was – except when he cracked nuts for the Princess! *Franz always helped us Sweeties*, thought Coffee, immediately forgetting that she was a child of Hamelin. *And now, I've got to help him.*

But how?



CHAPTER 58

Escape from Whack-a-Mouse



Just as Coffee had puzzled out the entire story, the Mouse Queen condemned the very people Coffee decided to help! This placed a difficulty before Coffee, until she noticed that although the Mouse Queen said she was going to ax, do away with, and string up Franz and Clara, the Mouse Queen never even took one step toward them. In fact, the Mouse Queen *kept her distance!*

And that distance was growing. The Mouse Queen dithered and dallied and did nothing. So, while the Mouse Queen's back was turned, Coffee slipped her hand into Clara's and pulled her into the bushes. Clara, being quick-witted, did the same to Franz, and he slipped into the bushes right behind – except that with his out-of-size head, he whacked the higher branches that Coffee had missed and a giant load of snow slipped off and buried the three, instantly blending them into the landscape of ice and snow.

It couldn't have gone better if they had planned it.

One second the Mouse Queen was tittering on about sprinkling roasted Nutcracker with a bit of salt, on toast – and the next, she was staring – mouse mouth agape – at the spot where her dinner had stood. Where had they gone?

Of course, the Mouse Queen blamed anyone but herself and immediately started slamming Krakatuk on any nearby mouse's head, until the only mouse left was poor Reggie's headless body on the sled. Me-

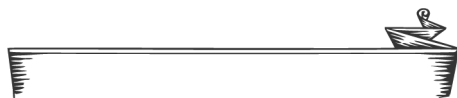
chanical mice ran in circles everywhere, nose-dived into snowdrifts and flipped over sideways, then spun their wheels until they all ran down.

That's when the Mouse Queen realized she had destroyed her own army.

A bit down in the mouth, but determined to rid her land of the Nutcracker and his dangerous jaws, the Mouse Queen glared down at the trembling Troll squeezed under the sled. Yanking the poor princess-turned-troll to her feet, the Mouse Queen kicked the sled back onto its runners, climbed on, and with imperial command yelled, "After them!"

Which was kind of funny because she didn't know the answer to, which way had they run? But Pirlipat the Troll didn't even bother to ask. She was too busy trying to please an angry Mouse with a lousy look – and a mind ready to strike first and question later.

So, Pirlipat trudged and nudged the sled as quickly as she could. And this time, for the first time, she did it without any sort of a grudge. For she was just happy NOT to have been cracked by The Nut.



CHAPTER 59

Don't Forget Reggie



Reggie was stuck in a problem of his own making. By pretending to lose his head when Clara had whacked him royally in Hamelin, he had managed to save it. But once the Ratties started singing the “when the Queen discovers no head, we’re dead” dirge, Reggie realized he may have created a problem bigger than being cold-cocked by a satin slipper.

There was no doubt about it. Mummy was mad, madder than Reggie had ever, ever seen – and that was saying something.

At first, Reggie had felt excited that Mummy would get so mad – over his headless body. He even thought she might *love* him. But as mouse after mouse fell beneath Krakatuk’s thump, he began to worry.

And ever since she'd clobbered Drosselmeir, Mummy hadn't looked at him once.

Reggie wasn't used to being ignored and he didn't like it.

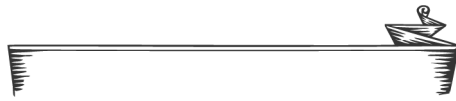
But after this last whack-a-mouse disaster, Reggie wasn't about to even squeak, let alone poke out his nose and expose it to something much worse than a satin slipper.

So here he was, stuck, pretending to be dead as a dormouse, and with no way to come back to life, without getting clobbered.

So Reggie did what all mice do when frightened. He laid low. Which wasn't hard, considering he was supposed to be dead, so all he had to do was lie there. Which, considering how lazy he was, was easy.

Except – it's hard to lounge on a sled that's being dragged around bends and over bumps and being constantly jiggled. Unless you hold on – off you go. And holding on is exactly what you *can't* do, if you're supposed to be dead.

Which meant Reggie was jiggled and jolted over the countryside, trying to appear lifeless, when in fact, he was trying to hold on for dear life.



CHAPTER 60

Waiting for “To Go”



Ever been in a spot where you so wanted to itch your nose, but you couldn't? Like when the dentist is drilling? That's what was bugging Clara. She had an overpowering urge to scratch her nose. The more she tried to ignore it, the more it itched. The more she clenched her fist and forced herself to stand still, the more she found herself fidgeting.

And with every little fidget, a little snow would trickle down.

Which was the last thing any of them wanted. They needed the Mouse Queen to be good-and-gone before their camouflage drifted away.

Clara could almost hear Franz's thoughts to "stand still" but that nose of hers was louder. "Scratch me!" it cried, over, and over, and over again, until Clara thought she'd scream. Which would be worse than scratching her nose.

Finally, the sled was righted and off poor Pirlipat trudged. As soon as it had disappeared around a copse of trees, Clara sneezed, which shocked Coffee so much that she jumped, which shook the snow, and it all fell to their feet, leaving the three hide-a-ways exposed – surprised and worried that the Mouse Queen had heard it all and was at that very moment on her way back to "get them!"

It took them a minute to recover, another minute to move, and another minute of nervous laughter before they could really feel like they had escaped.

For now.

CHAPTER 61

Save the Children



After finally laughing out the last of their fear and relief, the three spent another minute catching their breath, then looked at each other with a “What now?” sort of moment.

Franz immediately asked about Drosselmeir and was told the horrible truth of the lost battle. He had a mighty, mournful moment before manning up, and moving on. “Where are the Sweeties?”

And with that question, the Nutcracker and Clara found themselves bounding through the snow after Coffee, on their way, or so they figured, to the Sweeties – *and*, Franz thought, *to Mother Ginger*. For he

knew he'd need someone with some sense to help him put together a game plan.

Which did a great injustice to Clara, and if Clara had known, she and Franz might have had a big row over it. So it's just as well that no one can hear the others' thoughts, as that might lead to way too many hard feelings. Besides, first thoughts are not always true thoughts. For in truth, Franz counted on Clara a lot.

After a half hour of making their way and hiding their tracks, Coffee gave a low whistle. Then a soft hooting came back, and a Gingerbread Man lifted a low pine bough and beckoned them in. After a whispered message, the Gingerbread Man motioned for the Nutcracker and Clara to follow, while Coffee took over his post.

After a bit more twists and turns and double backs to confuse anyone trying to find them, the Nutcracker and Clara walked into a very sweet hide-away. The Sweeties had fashioned licorice lean-tos, with sugar cube chimneys to keep warm, and were wearing confectionary coats and cotton candy earmuffs, and were toasting marshmallows for dinner. Franz was quick to realize that Mother Ginger had forced the Sweeties to do everything – except for the marshmallow roast – and he was glad to see her.

Glad wasn't even close to how Mother Ginger felt, when she saw the new – and maybe not improved, but at least walking and talking – version of Franz as a Nutcracker. She was so happy she would have hugged him, except that his gigantic pair of jaws kept him just out of reach. So she contented herself with patting his back – which she continued to do the entire time they talked – which at first Franz was glad to have, but after a while it grew annoying, as he began to feel like a dog.

Mother Ginger explained all the things that had happened, after Franz was struck by Krakatuk and turned into the toy Nutcracker. How she'd snuck the Sweeties out the window by screening them with her skirts, and how they'd ended up making camp here. And then Franz

learned the nasty answer of why it was snowing. It was “fall-out” from using Krakatuk – and the more the Mouse Queen whacked away,

the more the snow fell. The Land of Sweets was in danger of never seeing spring again.

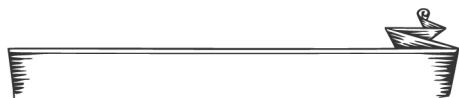
Then Mother Ginger turned to Clara. “Clara! You’ve grown, but you’re still you. Must have cost a few battles there!” A few of the Sweeties looked up at the sound of Clara’s name and with sticky faces, and stickier fingers, drifted to her side, leaving little marshmallow fingerprints all over her dress and arms as they remembered Clara and Hamelin.

“What are we going to do?” asked Clara.

“We have to save the children,” was Mother Ginger’s prompt response. “We’ve got to get them home before...” Mother Ginger left the explanation drift away, since the children were standing right before them.

But Franz already knew, and Clara figured out, that the Hamelin children were becoming sweeter by the day, which normally would be a good thing. But it appeared that too much sweetness rotted the brain, or at least the spunk, both of which are needed for growing children. So, they really did need to save the children.

Which wasn’t going to be that easy, not with a Mad Mouse with a Nasty Nut on the loose.



CHAPTER 62

Build a Better Mousetrap



There's only one solution to a mouse that's a louse and on the loose. Okay, maybe two solutions.

You could get a cat – which they couldn't – for no cats followed the tune the piper piped. Do you think that's because cats are tone-deaf, or just too independent to do what someone wants – like follow, when they are supposed to?

Fiddle!

Actually, the pipe could count as another solution, because you could pipe them out, *if you had a magic pipe*, but they didn't. So piping was out, too.

So, the only solution to a mouse on the loose (at this particular moment, and to these particular people) was to set a trap.

And that was Clara's idea. Franz immediately knew what she was thinking – Rube Goldberg! This had been one of their used-to-be favorite past times – putting together elaborate, chain-reaction contraptions to, say, flip an egg – or, in our case, catch a mouse.

Once explained, the Sweeties were IN. Off they scattered, dragging back gumballs and candy canes and lollipops and licorice (all on a giant, Land-of-Sweets scale) to help Franz and Clara build a giant Mouse Trap.

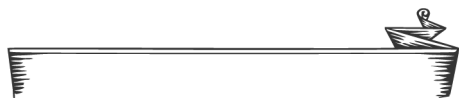
Mother Ginger gave the Nutcracker and Clara her hoop underskirt, and with a bit of twine, together it made a cage to catch a rat. The

Teas donated a tiny shoe to kick the string, to drop the cage, to catch the rat. And a gumball was just the thing to knock the shoe, to kick the string, to drop the cage, and catch a rat! Then they added candy canes to trip the switch, to start the ball, to knock the shoe, to kick the string, to drop the cage. And catch a rat! Finally, a lemon drop that went kerplop could push the candy canes to trip the switch, to start the ball, to knock the shoe, to kick the string, to drop the cage – and catch a rat!

Exhausted, they all stared at their amazing mousetrap with pride and admiration. If that couldn't catch a mouse, then what could?

They were all very happy, until a wee small voice asked, "Where's the bait?"

No bait is a big problem when you want to catch a mouse. It's the "trap" factor of a trap. Without bait to get the mouse to even come near the trap, it's not really a trap at all. It's just something taking up space.



CHAPTER 63

Where's the Bait?



So, everyone took inventory. They'd used up all their candy supplies to build the trap. They had no cheese. What were they to do? Chaos broke out, and everyone talked at once. A few Sweeties suggested pulling out the gumdrop from the trap. But as Clara and Franz considered each and every piece of the trap, they realized they had engineered it so well that not a single piece was expendable.

That's when Mother Ginger noticed the three Chocolates in a tight little trio, obviously in *deep discussion*. As she drifted closer, Mother Ginger saw they were arguing over a box of chocolates. At first, Mother Ginger thought they were arguing over whether-or-not to give up their goodies, but soon realized they were arguing over which piece should be placed under the hoop. Which piece of chocolate would most entice a mouse to come and nibble until the giant hoop dropped down and trapped her?

Each Chocolate wanted their particular piece of confectionary creation to be chosen. And although there was a good amount of pride involved, there was also the firm conviction that their chocolate morsel would be *the* morsel to tempt a mouse. When they looked up to see Mother Ginger, the Chocolates immediately turned to her for arbitration, hoping she would pick *their* piece of chocolate.

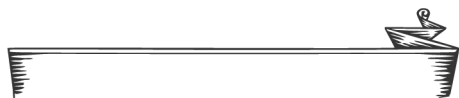
Now, Mother Ginger was Mother Ginger because she *noticed things*. She observed children and knew what they needed, and when

they needed it. And these three children needed to know they were special, *and* they needed to know to quit arguing and see the big picture! Fast!

So, Mother Ginger oohed and aahed over each piece of chocolate, and then she used each piece to lead right up to the trap. And so, the trap was set, the bait was placed, and now all they had to do was wait.

And so, they did.

They waited. And waited. And waited some more. (You know the saying that a watched pot never boils? Well, the same goes for a watched mousetrap. It never snaps.)



CHAPTER 64

Iced Coffee



In the meantime, poor Princess Pirlipat was stuck as the Mouse Queen's troll, and she had dragged the sled around in circles, hither and yon, over the snow, through the Land of Sweets, until she dropped in a sweaty, sore and sick-at-heart mess. Amazingly, the place where she dropped was right in front of the entrance to the Sweeties hideout.

Coffee was so surprised when the sled stopped at her feet for Pirlipat had pulled the sled by, two times already – Coffee was so surprised, that she froze in her tracks. And when the Mouse Queen awoke with her second jolt of the day, she was so angry that she lashed out at the first person she saw, which was Coffee. Krakatuk came down on Coffee's head and 'kapow!' the Mouse Queen had *iced* Coffee.

There, Coffee stood – a perfect ice statue – beautiful and ice-blue, shimmering in the moonlight.

The Mouse Queen barely stopped for no more than a quick glance, because she knew where there was one Sweetie, there had to be more. And where there were Sweeties, she was sure she'd find that nasty Nutcracker. And she could whack him, and all her problems would be over. And then, no threat would remain to her Krakatuk, her magic nut, and she would once again reign supreme, and eat to her heart's content.

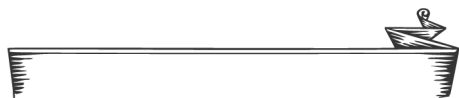
So, the Mouse Queen pushed on – silently, softly, and slowly – for she was now so fat she could hardly waddle one leg past the other. But

desperation is the stuff of miracles, and on she waded through the snow and bushes, until she could hear the Sweeties.

The Sweeties were hiding and growing impatient, and occasional fits of whispers would break out with questions like “What’s taking so long?” or “Where is she?” And the additional complaints like, “My foot’s asleep!” or “I have to pee!” which were immediately met by the other Sweeties, self-righteously shushing the others with loud “Shhh-hh!” and “Keep quiet!” which made more noise than the whispers before.

It was the hissing to be quiet which alerted the Mouse Queen that she had found her prey. And, from behind the bushes, she counted noses. And as her numbers grew, she realized she could not swing fast enough to succeed in cracking all the Sweeties *and* the Nutcracker. As she shuffled backwards – for she was too round to round herself around, and go back, forwards. As she shuffled backwards, she thought desperately of another plan to bring down the Sweeties, when she remembered the *PIPE*! She could put them all to sleep with the Pipe, and then whack-a-Sweetie at her leisure!

Ah, that felt good – knowing that soon, she’d be piping a different tune!



CHAPTER 65

Piping a Different Tune



Pirlipat the Troll watched the return of the Mouse Queen, and in her heart of hearts, Pirlipat was ruing the day she had ever sworn allegiance to such a mistress. For Pirlipat now knew that in saving her own skin, she had lost it, and was now stuck with a troll-ish hide. She was almost at the point of *accepting responsibility* and fessing up that she, alone, had brought this curse on her head.

Just as Pirlipat was in the middle of a potential conversion, the Mouse Queen came back, and all the fear, all the terror, all the need to *not get bonked by Krakatuk* came rushing back to Pirlipat. So, when the Mouse Queen came back up to her troll, the troll groveled on the ground and excused herself for being in the Mouse Queen's way.

Thus Pirlipat lost her chance to pipe a different tune, and she was soon to find that she would be dancing, yet again, to the Queen's command.

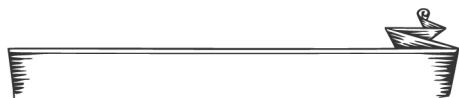
The Mouse Queen pulled out Drosselmeir's pipe. She fingered the holes. She lipped the mouthed piece. She blew a tiny puff. She looked satisfied and very devious, and very, very dangerous.

Pirlipat slipped back a bit away from the Mouse Queen, which was absolutely the wrong thing to do. For the Mouse Queen immediately looked at her, frowned, swung Krakatuk, and lightly tapped her princess-turned-troll on the shoulder.

Pirlipat thought she was a goner, iced like Coffee. But no, she was shrinking, changing – oh joy of joys! – she was going back to human form. She was becoming herself again! But no, this was not her body, these were not her fingers – they were the rich mocha of coffee. In fact, as Pirlipat looked at her reflection in the iced folds of Coffee's veil, she realized she was *a perfect duplicate* of Coffee! Un-iced.

Then the Mouse Queen started to pipe, and Pirlipat-as-Coffee started to dance. And the more she tried not to dance, the more she had to dance. This was worse than being a troll, Pirlipat realized. Now she had no say in what she said or did. She was no more than a puppet being piped to do – who knows what!

The Mouse Queen knew what, and she was gloating inside, thinking that her little bit of trickery with Pirlipat was perfect. When the Sweeties saw Coffee dance into their hideout, they wouldn't suspect a thing. And even if they did, the split second it took them to suspect something was wrong - would make it too late to do anything about it. The pipe would already have done its magic, wrought its worst, and spun its spell – and the entire camp of Sweeties would be a slave to the music.



CHAPTER 66

Playing the Piper

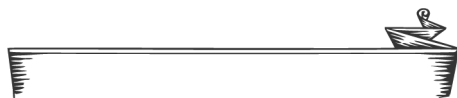


The Mouse Queen's plan worked just as she thought.

When Clara first saw Coffee dance into the hideout, she thought it was weird that Coffee had left her post, and weirder still that she left it to dance. *But then*, thought Clara, *I've observed that the Sweeties don't always make sense*. Then Clara saw first one Tea, then another Tea, fall sound asleep. And when the Gingerbread men dropped flat on their faces, snoring loudly, Clara knew it must be magic.

She turned to run to warn the others, and as she did, she too heard the music and the piping was irresistible. Clara pirouetted round to the music, even as she tried to move away. She could feel herself softly floating, carried by the melody to drowse, even while her brain clamored, "Danger, danger, danger!" The danger warning became a lullaby, as Clara drifted down to curl up in a snow bank, with the now soothing song that called to her, "Come, follow me."

And that's what Clara did – she followed the music into a Land of Sleep. And, one by one, all the Sweeties and even the Nutcracker fell asleep.



CHAPTER 67

Trapped a Rat



When the Nutcracker fell under the spell and was fast asleep at Pirlipat-now-Coffee's feet, Pirlipat wanted to join her friends and sleep, too. She wanted to never, ever, in a million years – to never, ever obey the Mouse Queen again. In desperation, she looked about for a way to help her friends.

That's when she noticed the giant mousetrap.

And then she noticed the chocolates leading up to the spot where the trap would fall.

And Pirlipat, in that instance, became a princess-in-heart; as she determined she would sacrifice herself, rather than let the Mouse Queen thump any Sweetie. The problem was, that the Mouse Queen was still piping away. And so Pirlipat-now-Coffee was still dancing away. As the Mouse Queen waddled closer, Pirlipat knew she had to make sure the first thing the Mouse Queen saw were the chocolates.

Off she danced to the line of chocolates, so that as the Mouse Queen came out of the bushes, Pirlipat was there, bowing and sweeping and dancing an invitation to "Come, follow me," as she gracefully revealed the wonderful row of bonbons laid out for a queen. After all, having been with the Mouse Queen for what seemed to be years, Pirlipat knew the Mouse Queen couldn't go more than five minutes without a sugar fix.

And she was right.

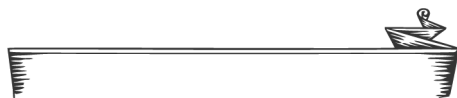
The Mouse Queen spied the chocolates, her favorites! She quit piping, popped a truffle past the drool oozing and dripping from her lips, and let the sweetness melt on her tongue as she groaned in delight. Pirlipat danced a couple more steps back, revealing a delightful piece of fudge – and the Mouse Queen rushed to cram it into her mouth with the bonbon.

Pirlipat began to realize that, without the Pipe piping, she was no longer compelled to dance. If she could only keep the Mouse Queen's mouth full, then maybe the spell would wear off and the Sweeties – and especially the Nutcracker – would wake up! So Pirlipat continued to dance – this time, in order to lure the Mouse Queen to another piece of chocolate, a piece covered in caramel. *That* ought to stick the Mouse Queen's jaws together for quite a while!

Before the Mouse Queen could notice the Little Teas stretching and yawning behind her, Pirlipat spun around and let the Mouse Queen see the perfect piece of dark chocolate. The Mouse Queen pounced – which was sort of like a really, fat, slinky, undulation – from one place to another. For first her fat arms flung out and then the fat on the back of her arms rolled forward, followed by her belly, with all her hind-end bumping and blending around. It was almost as if she dove to the ground, and waves of fat flowed after.

And when the Mouse Queen grabbed the chocolate, she bumped into the lemon drop... which went ker-plop... which pushed the candy canes... which tripped the switch... which started the ball... which knocked the shoe... which kicked the string... which dropped the cage... and caught the rat! (The Mouse Queen, that is.)

The Pipe flew from the Mouse Queen's hand – and better still, her staff with Krakatuk flew from her grasp and rolled to Pirlipat's feet. And the Mouse Queen? The Mouse Queen was caught in Mother Ginger's hoop skirt – with bits and pieces of her squeezing out between the hoops and ties, like an overstuffed pillow.



CHAPTER 68

Wake up! Wake up!



Ever been caught between waking up and dreaming, twixt clear and cloudy, not knowing if you are asleep or awake? It's a muddy, morning mess of imagining. First you think you're awake and "something awful" is going on. Then you realize you're asleep and just dreaming. And then you try to wake yourself up fully, which only makes the "something awful" get more awful. And so you try harder to wake up, and the very fact that you *can't* wake up creates a panic so big, so awful, that you almost believe the "something awful" in your dream is really, really real, and now you are in one big, awful mess!

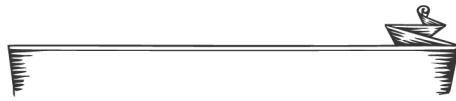
Well, that's the mess the Sweeties were in. When the piping stopped, the spell began to wane, and they were caught 'tween the dream and the seen – and unable to fully distinguish which was which. Were they awake? Or were they dreaming?

If it hadn't been for the *snap* of Mother Ginger's hoops clamping down around the Mouse Queen, and the *swoosh* of the trap swinging up into the air, and the *crash* of both the Mouse Queen and the trap hitting the ground with a loud *thump* that shot out an air wave shocking their eardrums, and the *twang* as the trap swung the Mouse Queen back up in the air, to jiggle up and down like a bungee cord playing out – if it hadn't been for all the noise – they might have lain in their muddy, morning mess of imagining for much too long.

Fortunately for our story, and for the Sweeties, they awoke with a jump. The Gingerbread Men hopped up and down on their stubby legs with their stubbier arms waving about as they shouted, “Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!” and then faster, “Wake up, wake up, wake up!”

Until everybody did.

Wake up.



CHAPTER 69

Princess Pirlipat's Triumph No, Your Majesty



And what a good thing to wake up to! The Mouse Queen stuffed and trussed like a turkey, ready to deep-fat fry, her angry black eyes flashing hotter than the oil, itself. Better yet, Krakatuk was safely in Coffee's hand – or was that Coffee? Who cared? They'd caught a rat!

And around they danced, singing, "Get out of bed, you sleepy-head! Get out of bed, wake up, wake up! Look at that! She took the bait! Look at that! She met her fate! Oh boy! Oh boy! Oh boy! Oh boy! Oh boy! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! We trapped a rat!"

The dancing and singing went on for some time, and while the Sweeties danced and while the Sweeties sang, the Mouse Queen turned her hot beady eyes on Pirlipat-now-Coffee. Pirlipat tried to avoid the stare, tried to avoid the command in those eyes, tried to avoid the bonds of slavery, which wanted to chain her once more to the Mouse Queen.

"Bring me my Nut! My Krakatuk!"

Pirlipat did not want to listen, but she couldn't stop the commands from getting inside her brain. She tried to dance a jig of victory, but her feet, which so recently could not stop dancing, now could not start dancing. Her feet shuffled and finally froze. She tried to sing the victory song, but all her lips kept forming were, "Yes, your Majesty." So, she clamped them tight and refused to open her mouth.

And all the while the Mouse Queen's eyes bore into her brain.

Pirlipat now began to look a bit more like coffee – the hot drink, not the Sweetie. She was hot and steamy, and a little froth skimmed the corners of her mouth, as she fought the urge to obey the Queen and bring Krakatuk – and lay it at her feet.

At that moment, Clara spied who she thought was Coffee, holding on to the Krakatuk and looking like she was going to keel over in a dead faint. The Sweetie Clara thought was Coffee turned and took a step closer to the Mouse Queen.

Heavens! thought Clara. *She's going to give Krakatuk to the Mouse Queen!* Clara looked around for the Nutcracker, but he was too far away to be of any help. That's when she noticed the Mouse Queen was gnawing her way through the hoops and string that formed her trap. In fact, the Mouse Queen was seconds away from – *No!* Clara thought. *But it was true!* As Clara watched, the Mouse Queen bit through the last hoop, and she was loose!

Pirlipat saw the Mouse Queen coming her way and that's all it took to give her a backbone. She would not give the Krakatuk to this rotten rodent! But before she could turn to run, the Mouse Queen grabbed Krakatuk.

Clara rushed in to do who-knows-what – but she was going to do it with all her might and all her heart. What she succeeded in doing was crashing in between the two, just as the Mouse Queen swung Krakatuk to end poor Pirlipat. Krakatuk missed Pirlipat and hit Clara, but Clara had succeeded! For Krakatuk flew out of the Mouse Queen's hands and back into Pirlipat's. And even as Clara was thumped on the noggin, and fell like a towel to the floor, the last thing she saw was Pirlipat fighting to keep Krakatuk.

Neither the Mouse Queen, nor Pirlipat, paid any attention to the lump on the ground that was Clara – for a fight over Krakatuk was in full force. Pirlipat had glommed onto the staff once more, and with all her heart, with all her might, and at the top of her lungs, was shouting,

“No, your Majesty! No, your Majesty! No, your Majesty!” And with a wrench that must have been left over from her days as a troll, Pirlipat tore Krakatuk off the top of the staff and flung the Nut far away – and straight to the Nutcracker.

With utter joy, Pirlipat-as-Coffee, shouted to the Nutcracker, “Crack it!”

All the Sweeties shouted, “Crack it!”

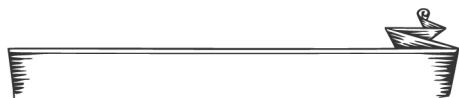
Mother Ginger shouted, “Crack it!” The only one who didn’t shout, “Crack it!” was Clara, who still lay in the snow, out like a light.

Oh, yes. There was *one* other who didn’t shout, “Crack it!” and that was the Mouse Queen.

The Mouse Queen felt as if she were swimming through a bowl of jelly. All her motions were slow and sluggish. Her eyesight was jiggling and joggling so much, she couldn’t see clearly. But this one thing she saw – the Nutcracker – whom she had cursed and brought into being. The one thing she saw was that nasty Nutcracker – raising Krakatuk to his massive, mighty jaws. And with one powerful crash of his teeth, he crushed the Nut – just as the Mouse Queen grabbed it. And then all the Mouse Queen saw was a wild, explosive light –and all she felt, was that she was exploding, too.

In fact, the Mouse Queen was zipping around like a giant mouse-balloon, jet-propelled and losing air, going in crazy circles – with everyone dodging and jumping, to avoid getting plastered by a quickly-deflating mouse.

The next thing the Mouse Queen knew, she was so close to the ground she could see the individual snowflakes that loomed up in front of her nose. ‘Round and ‘round and ‘round she went in big circles, as she shrunk smaller and smaller, and went slower and slower, until the bag of hot air that had once been the Mouse Queen landed with a final “phhhhtttt!” of expelled air, and sank into the snow.



CHAPTER 70

Victory and Celebration, Sort of



All in the Land of Sweets were staring at the empty balloon, that was once an evil queen. Even Reggie sneaked a peek, for he had given up playing dead, and slipped off the sled, and snuck behind a bush to see where his mummy was going – believing as he did, that knowledge is power. So he needed to know what she was doing. But now, he was actually sorry that he knew.

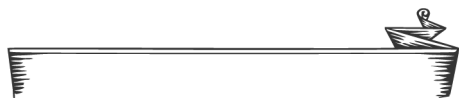
Everyone else started to shout with joy – but not Reggie.

While the rest of the Land of Sweets celebrated, Reggie shed a tear.

While the rest of the Land of Sweets danced, Reggie stared in fear.

While the rest of the Land of Sweets rejoiced, Reggie knew that all he had left of his mummy were memories of meanness – yet he still was sad. It made no sense. Or did it? Once or twice she was nice, kind of. But after all, she was his mummy.

So while the rest of the Land of Sweets sang, Reggie stole the balloon that was once his mummy, and Reggie snuck back to the sled to be alone.



CHAPTER 71

Alone and Lost



If you're a pessimist, you think something bad will ruin a celebration or sour a victory. And if you're a novelist, you make sure something bad will ruin a celebration or sour a victory. So that is what is going to happen here.

During all the Sweeties' celebration, and during all of Reggie's loss, a wonderful and amazing thing was happening to the Land of Sweets. The spell was broken.

The snow stopped. No one noticed. They were too busy celebrating.

The sun came out. No one noticed. They were too busy dancing.

The snow melted. No one noticed. They were too busy rejoicing.

The flowers grew. No one noticed. They were too busy singing.

Then changes started happening to them – to each and every one of them – and they finally took notice.

The Sweeties began to lose some of their vacantness, their too-sweet-and-silly-to-be-true-ness. They remembered Hamelin and their homes. They were returning to the children they used to be. They couldn't wait to tell Mother Ginger! *Where was she?*

Pirlipat-once-a-troll-but-turned-into-Coffee felt she was growing a little taller, a little plumper, a little meaner ... no, not meaner, just knowing she could be mean again. But knowing that this time, she would

fight against that mean streak in herself. And she couldn't wait to show Franz! *Where was he?*

The Nutcracker's head had shrunk, and shifted, and changed – back to Franz's quite normal, and very nice head. He stopped dancing. Up flew his hands and he felt all over his face. Was that was his nose, his chin and his ears? He couldn't wait to show Clara! *Where was she?*

That's when they all noticed Mother Ginger kneeling beside Clara. All the children, including Pirlipat, stood silent where they were – afraid to come closer, and afraid to look away.

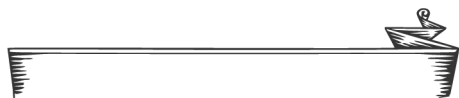
Franz rushed to Clara, crying, "Clara, Clara!" But Clara didn't answer. Her eyes remained closed and she didn't move. Franz couldn't believe it. He touched her and her skin was pasty and cold. *What was wrong? What had happened?* She needed help, but he didn't know what to do!

Franz looked up for help, but everyone was looking at him. Even Mother Ginger looked at him for guidance. Why did they think he should know what to do? He was a clockmaker's assistant, not a doctor. But he plunged ahead, anyway. He started rubbing Clara's hands, He took off his coat and covered her, thinking if he could only warm her, it might help.

Mother Ginger gave him her shawl. They wrapped Clara up in it and Franz picked her up, determined to carry her to help.

But he didn't know where to go.

So, there he stood, Clara at last in his arms. But she was growing colder every minute, and the colder Clara felt, the more alone and lost Franz grew. And soon, Franz felt very lost and alone.



CHAPTER 72

What About Drosselmeir?



And where was Drosselmeir during all this? Why hadn't he rushed to join the rest? Was he still enchanted? Was he still a whatever-it-is that a magician would turn into, if struck by the Magic Nut, Krakatuk? (If you remember, we never solved this question. And before we move on, this is your last chance for conjecture, last chance for you to guess as to what a magician, or clockmaker, might become if put under a magic spell. Well, what do you think?)

The clock is running – what do you think? Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

Sorry. Time's up! We're back at the sled where we left the enchanted Drosselmeir ... and we still don't know what form his spell took. For there he is, looking pretty much like he's always looked. His hair is a little wilder, his eyes are a little brighter, and his hat is a little worse for wear. But there he is, standing beside the sled.

Except for the fact that he's patting the back of a four-foot mouse.

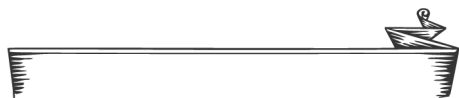
For Reggie was sobbing his heart out, and Drosselmeir was patting his back and murmuring kind words to the brokenhearted son of the Mouse Queen. Drosselmeir was saying things like, "You'll always have your memories." And all Reggie could think of was the time she sent him up the Krakatuk tree, and he was so scared. Or Drosselmeir would say, "You know she loved you." And all Reggie could remember was her booting him down the dark Clock tunnel, to do her dirty work.

In fact, the more Drosselmeir tried to remind Reggie that he would always have his mother in his memory, the less Reggie felt like crying. So, in the end, Reggie did stop crying, and Drosselmeir thought he had helped the young mouse through a difficult time.

So Drosselmeir quit patting Reggie on the back, murmured something about having to get back to the others – and was Reggie sure he was all right, and did he mind being left alone?

At that moment, Reggie noticed that the curse had been lifted from the Land of Sweets and that new gumdrops were growing on bushes and that he was the only mouse left. Reggie smiled a little at Drosselmeir and nodded that he was okay, and as Drosselmeir left, Reggie smiled a little more. *Yes, I am okay*, he thought. *More than okay*, he knew, because not only was he the only mouse left in the Land of Sweets – he was bigger than any mouse alive!

And he wasn't about to ask, "Why?"



CHAPTER 73

Drosselmeir to the Rescue



When Drosselmeir burst through the bushes, all he thought at first was, *the curse is lifted!*

When Drosselmeir burst through the bushes, all Franz could think was, *help at last!*

When Drosselmeir saw Clara in Franz's arms, he felt a rush of dismay.

When Franz saw Drosselmeir reach for Clara, he felt a rush of relief.

That's when Drosselmeir realized that Franz thought he could help. And that's when Franz realized that Drosselmeir couldn't help.

And it was true. Drosselmeir couldn't help Clara – not in the Land of Sweets.

The only hope for Clara, indeed the only hope for any child of Hamelin, was to return to Hamelin before the magic of the Land of Sweets once again began to sugarcoat and change them back to Sweeties. And for Clara, her very life depended on escaping that magic.

Or so Drosselmeir hoped. He dearly hoped that the magic grown in this land could not pass through the portal and could not go through the Clock, and that Sweet Magic had no power in plain old Hamelin. And so, he was running – running as fast as he could, to the clock.

And everyone followed. Except for Reggie. He was quite happily eating a light lunch of licorice and lemonade. For unlike his momma, Reggie was *not* a glutton.

Off everyone ran – out of the hideout, past the sled, through the forest, and to the clock. Drosselmeir plunged through the clock with Clara in his arms.

Just as Franz was ready to follow, Mother Ginger called for help. He turned to find her huffing and puffing, “I’ve lost the Teas, I mean the girls.” Franz hesitated for a second, torn between his fear for Clara and his fondness for the three little Teas, I mean girls.

“You get the rest through!” Franz yelled, as he ran back into the woods. He retraced his steps, calling for the girls, but no answer. He ran back toward the hideout and came to a stop at the clearing where Reggie was sitting in the sled – with three little girls enthralled, as he regaled them with stories about his horrible mother, the Mouse Queen. They screamed with delight when he kicked his size four – in imitation of the Mouse Queen’s size eleven – boot, up to his behind.

Franz almost laughed, despite – or maybe because of – his fear for Clara. Then he called to the girls.

Surprised, they looked up, realized they had been left behind, and – half-reluctantly, half-scared that they had almost been left behind – they made their good-byes to Reggie. Then off they went with Franz.

And even though Franz was their hero, they were already missing their new friend.

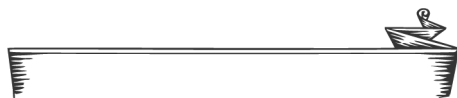
And as Reggie sat there licking his licorice twist, he realized that for the very first time in his life someone had truly liked him. They even thought he was funny!

And Reggie realized that he liked them, too. And that was food for thought.



PART 4
"BACK FROM BEYOND"
HAMELIN





CHAPTER 74

Alone and Lost From the Other Side of the Clock



When Clara awoke, she didn't know where she was at first. After all, she had been clobbered with a giant Nut in a different land and had expected to wake up there. Yet here she was, she realized – in her own bed, in her own home, in her own land.

No! she thought, No! No! No! If I'm in my own bed, I had to have dreamed it all! Franz is still stuck on the other side of the clock!

At that moment, Clara never felt so alone and lost. At that moment, Clara had never been so close to giving up. At that moment, Clara had never been so sure she had to *find out*.

And out of bed she jumped.

Clara ran out of her room, down the hall, and to the landing where the Clock stood.

The Clock ticked. The Clock tocked. It was working! Suddenly, Clara had hope. She knew it couldn't be a dream! She flung open the door to the Clock and rushed inside.

And ran full force into Franz.

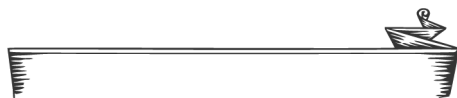
They tumbled out of the Clock, landing in a jumbled heap on the landing carpet. Clara quickly rolled onto her knees and looked at Franz.

"Where's your head?"

And after all that Franz had been through with enchantments and curses – he actually felt his head to make sure it was there! And then he laughed in relief.

Explanations were never given, for at that moment Clara was pounced on by the girls, who had stood frightened, just inside the Clock – afraid that something terrible had just attacked their hero. Imagine their relief that it was Clara! And that she was not d-e-a-d! And that they were home safe and sound.

So, the girls shouted and giggled and hugged until they could finally quiet down for a moment. Then they remembered their mommas, and off they ran for home – without a single by-your-leave, or good-bye, or backward glance at Clara and Franz.



CHAPTER 75

Home at Last



Clara and Franz sat side by side at the top of the stairs, beneath the quiet tick-tocking of the grand old Clock. Neither spoke. They just sat there.

Then Franz turned to Clara and said, “I was so afraid that I had lost you.”

Clara looked up and admitted, “I was so afraid I’d never find you.”

They looked at each other a little more and slowly smiled, just a little.

“I thought it was all a dream.”

“More like a nightmare,” responded Franz.

And Clara agreed.

And they were very happy just to sit there and be normal, very happy not to be apart, and very happy not to have to worry about any mice.

Eventually though, they heard noises below. And through the windows they could see all the happy parents running to meet their children, and they knew the house would soon be flooded with the entire village. Then they saw Drosselmeir walk from the house to the front gate, and the flood of people ran around and around him, as they slapped his back and shook his hand for bringing their children home.

They had no idea Drosselmeir was to blame for their children being gone in the first place – instead, imagining foul play, or fowl play. For

they blamed a chicken-hearted chicken-farmer for the loss of their children. (Don't ask – it's another story entirely.)

And as Drosselmeir shook hands and accepted thanks, he turned and looked up from the gate, and through the window, to Franz and Clara. And nodded his head in thanks to *them*.

“He's giving us time.”

“Yes.”

“Then let's enjoy the time we have.”

“Yes, let's.”

So, Franz and Clara continued to sit there at the top of the stairs to just enjoy being alone.

Except that they weren't.

Alone, that is.

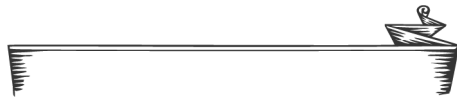
For from the grand old Clock, a furry paw pushed open the door, a whiskered nose peeked out, and soon a size four boot of a four-foot mouse stepped through. Reggie had decided that he really, really liked being liked – and he was back for more.

You could say he was a glutton for friendship.

Besides, his pockets were full of sweets, and he knew he could always go back for more.



THE END



Thank you, dear Readers!

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About Bobbi Boes



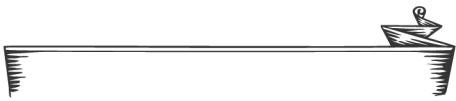
Bobbi Boes is an award-winning screenwriter, creator and head writer of an interactive television series. She also writes for stage and multi-media theatrical productions. She is currently working on *G'ma Goerzen Stories*, a children's off beat series and *Nutcracker-the Mousical*.

Boes teaches Screenwriting, Film, and Video. She now mentors select writers in her on-line Writer's Room¹ and is a member of the Writers Guild of America, West, the Dramatists Guild and ASCAAP.

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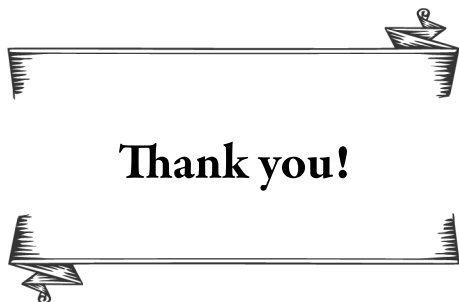
About Debra Gayle Sut



Temecula Ca. artist, Debra Gayle Sut creates special works of art from Murals, Faux Finishes, Fine Art to Pottery. Debra is a graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology, NYC with a degree in Fashion Illustration and Visual Presentation. Also a graduate of the Empire State College at SUNY, New Paltz, NY with a degree in Visual Arts.

Nuts to You - the Nutcracker Retold is Debra's first foray into illustrations and book covers. Debra has created a special line of Nuts to You character gifts and clothing.

<https://www.debragayle designs.com/>



Thank you!

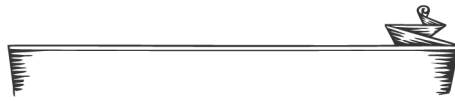
A big, big thank you to Beverly Stephenson, who first asked me to write a musical based on The Nutcracker Ballet. Without her belief in me, this journey would never have started. (And a long, long journey its been!)

To my grandson, Trenten, who, in the official capacity of first audience and critic, laughed in all the right places and pointed out typos and grammatical errors with the aplomb of a 5th grader.

Thank you to my Beta Readers, who asked questions, applauded me and encouraged me in more ways than one. Ruth Williams, Mardi Chalmers, and Debbie Parnakian, thank you!

To the one and only Debra Gayle Sut, without whom, none of us, would see the characters come to life. Thank you, Debra, for the months and months, and sketch upon sketch, it took to develop your wonderful and amazing illustrations.

And an enor-mouse thank you to Mary Huckstep, for taking on the task of taming my tenses, corralling my commas and making sense out of my sallies into silliness – which are plenty of fun but went on and on without end, kind of like this acknowledgement



This is a work of fiction.



Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Boes, Bobbi. Nuts to You – The Nutcracker Retold

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Cover Design, Characters, & Hamelin Illustrations by Debra Gayle Sut

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