

A story about a girl, her talking cat, and magic.

Bridget and the Secret Passageway

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Sometimes it pays to talk to you cat, rather than your dad. In “Bridget and the Secret Passageway”, Bridget learns from her cat Gray that there are secret passageways – cat-sized, mouse-sized, and even bug-sized – that crisscross through her neighborhood. Once she and her friends learn how to shrink, they can follow Gray on an adventure that brings them face to face with evil Queen Ecce, and her dastardly assistants, the Judges.

Chapter 1

Bridget had a lot on her mind. Not just the usual things that a nine year old would think about – like her friends, and what was on TV, and bugs and rocks, and how silly her dad was. No, Bridget was thinking about big things. Bridget was thinking about renovations.

Earlier that day, she had said to her dad, “I’d like to renovate our house. Either I want a bigger room, or I want a secret passageway.”

Her dad had said, “How can we do that? If we make your room bigger, we’ll have to make another room smaller. And we can’t put in a secret passageway – there’s no place for it to go.”

Bridget was too polite to argue about this, but it seemed to her to be really unfair. After all, she was being good, and she really wanted a secret passageway! But her dad didn’t seem to want to talk about it – and even though she knew her mom was really the boss of the family anyway, she didn’t really think that her mom would be willing to renovate her room, either – her mom was still kind of renovating the bathroom instead, which was okay, but not nearly as exciting as a secret passageway.

That night, after stories (which sometimes had people who DID have secret passages!), Bridget walked into her room carrying Gray. Her dad tucked her in, gave her a kiss, and said “nighty night! Sleep tight! Don’t be bug food!”

“I won’t”, Bridget replied, as her dad walked away from her room.

“He’s such a silly,” Bridget said to Gray.

“He sure is,” Gray replied. “Can you believe how he doesn’t know anything about secret passageways?”

Bridget blinked, and blinked again – this was a really unusual moment in her nine-year-old life. For one thing, Gray is a *cat* – and even though Bridget often pretended that Gray could talk, she had never really heard her say anything out loud.

And then there was the other thing – the part about the secret passageways. Bridget decided to think about that, and leave the questions about Gray talking for later.

“What do you mean, Gray?” she asked, as if it was perfectly natural to have a conversation about secret passageways with a cat that hadn’t (as far as Bridget knew, anyway) spoken a word about anything, ever before.

“Your dad is thinking that secret passage ways are used by people who are people sized,” Gray replied. “But what a silly! Everyone knows that secret passage ways aren’t people sized – they’re cat sized.”

“They are?”

“Of course!” Gray purred proudly.

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This was almost more than Bridget could have wished for! “Do we have any here?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“Well,” Gray purred. “I’m not really supposed to tell...”

“Then there are?” Bridget cried.

“Ssshhh!” hissed Gray. “You’re supposed to be asleep, remember? And I’m definitely not supposed to be talking.”

“Okay, okay,” Bridget whispered back. “Can you show me where the secret passageways are in our house?”

“Well – I could if you were the right size,” Gray replied. “But how are you going to shrink down to cat size?”

“There are cats as big as me!” Bridget protested. “What about jaguars?”

“Well – they’re too big for the passageways, too. Even Suzie-” – Grey was talking about her big brother, who was another gray cat who lived with Bridget – “even Suzie is sometimes too big to go in – though lately he’s been skinnier, so we’ve gotten to go together.”

“So how can I get to go in?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” Gray frowned. “But it must be possible. I’ve seen other people in the secret passageways sometimes...”

“There are a lot of secret passageways?” Bridget asked, almost stunned with delight.

“Oh my, yes,” said Gray. “There are a bunch that are cat sized – and lots of others that are more mouse sized – and I have no idea how many bug-sized ones there are. There are probably almost as many

bug-sized passageways as there are bugs – and they seem to crisscross everywhere.”

“So if I could shrink really small – down to the size of a bug – I could go anywhere I wanted by using a secret passage?”

“Well, I suppose” sniffed Gray. “But I think that the bug-sized ones are kind of moldy and gross. The cat-sized secret passageways are definitely the nicest – ask anyone!”

Bridget wasn't sure who she would ask about that – she didn't know anyone who had ever used a secret passageway, except, she supposed, for Gray – but she didn't think it was that important anyway. “I'm sure you're right, Gray,” Bridget said. “But how can I get to see?”

“I don't know,” Gray said again. “But I could go ask one of the people in the passageways – they must know.”

“Oh, could you?” Bridget cried.

“Yes – but you have to be quiet – I wouldn't want anyone to catch me slipping in or out of the passageway.” Grey stood up, stretched, and gave Bridget's hand a little nuzzle with her nose. “Here goes!” she purred.

Then she slipped under Bridget's bed, and disappeared.

Bridget waited a moment, and then called quietly, “Gray? Gray?”

There was no answer. Did this mean that Gray was gone? Or had she just stopped talking? After a minute, Bridget just had to find out. Slowly, she wiggled out from under her blanket, leaned over the edge of her bed, twisted her head around sideways and backwards so she could see all the way back to the radiator –

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- and that's exactly where she was when her mother walked into the room.

"Lovey! What are you doing?" her mother asked.

"Looking for Gray," Bridget replied.

"Well, I'm sure she's around somewhere – and if you don't see her now, you'll probably see her when you wake up. Come on, get back under your covers."

Bridget was happy to slide back onto her pillow – she certainly didn't want her mom to be looking where the secret passageway was.

"Good night, Lovey!" her mom said, as she tucked her in and gave her a kiss.

"Nighty-night, mom," Bridget replied with a hug.

"See you in the morning!"

It was quiet again. Bridget was sure of one thing, though – Gray hadn't been under that bed – so she must be in the secret passageway!

When Bridget woke up, she had a lot to do – eat breakfast, wash up, brush her teeth, practice her viola, get ready for school – and so she didn't have time to find Gray, and ask about the magic.

When she got home, though, she saw Gray sitting on the front lawn.

"Hi, Gray!" Bridget said.

Gray stretched, and looked at her.

Michael O'Neil

“Did you find out the secret?” Bridget went on.

Gray stood up slowly, and nuzzled Bridget’s hand.

“Why won’t you talk to me, Gray?” Bridget wondered.

“Because she’s a cat, you silly,” said a voice behind her.

Bridget whirled around. Her sister, Esme, was standing in the driveway.

“She might be a cat – but I heard her talking last night.”

“Is that so, Bud? Well, maybe she just talks at night, then – or maybe just when you’re alone.”

Late that night, after dinner and stories, Bridget carried Gray into her room. After her dad tucked her in, Bridget snuggled up next to Gray, so that their noses were almost touching.

“Is what Esme said true, Gray? That you can only talk when it’s dark, or when we’re alone?”

“I don’t really know,” Gray whispered back. “I don’t really talk much at all, you know...”

Bridget knew this was true, and besides, that wasn’t really what she wanted to know. “Did you find out the secret, Gray? Did you find out how I can shrink into the secret passageways?”

“Yes. I talked to a little man, who explained the whole magic to me. It was very interesting!”

Bridget waited, but Gray didn’t continue. “Come on, Gray!” she implored. “What is the secret?”

Gray gave her a slow cat-smile. “Well,” she purred, “it begins with a four-leaf clover.”

“A four-leaf clover!” Bridget exclaimed. “So that’s why people think they’re special!”

“Of course,” said Gray. “They’re always associated with the ‘little people’, aren’t they?”

“That’s right,” Bridget replied, remembering that leprechauns are sometimes called ‘little people’. “So what else goes into the formula, Gray?”

“Well,” the cat said, “you also need a crystal – and a lucky penny – you know, one that you find on the ground. And then some cat hair, if you want to use the cat passages – and some mouse hair, if you want to use the mouse-ways – and a bug, if you want to use the bug passageways. I think that ladybugs work best – if you use an ant, you might get to be kind of anty yourself.”

“So – what do I do with these things? I sure hope you don’t make a tea out of them – I don’t want to drink a ladybug!”

Gray’s eyes got wide. “No, you don’t make a tea! Honestly, sometimes I think you are as silly as your dad.”

“What do you do with all of the things, then?” Bridget asked.

“You put them in a small bag, and keep them under your pillow for three days,” Gray said. “After the third day, you tie the bag around your finger at night – and off you go!”

“That’s great, Gray! I’m going to find everything tomorrow!”

Michael O'Neil

“Well – some of those things aren’t very easy – like the four-leaf clover. But when you do find them, I’ll show you how to get into the secret passageways in this house.”

Bridget was overjoyed! “Thanks, Gray!” she cried, giving the cat a great big hug.

Gray clearly enjoyed both the thanks and the hug. “And when we’re in there,” she continued, “we can visit your friends’ houses, if you want.”

Bridget’s eyes widened. Here was a possibility she hadn’t thought about! “Could they come with us?” Bridget asked.

“If they had their own magic bags, I suppose they could,” Gray said.

“That’s – just - GREAT!” Bridget exclaimed, almost ready to burst.

“But remember – everybody has to find their own lucky penny. And if they don’t have some cat hair, they can’t go with you in the cat passages – and only the people that have bugs in their bags can use the bug passages – though goodness knows why anyone would want to go in those moldy holes!”

Bridget could certainly imagine why people would want to be in any kind of secret passageway, even the bug passages – but Gray seemed to be convinced that they weren’t good, so she didn’t argue the point. “Can you help show my friends how the passages work, too?” she asked.

“Yes – but only when you’ve assembled your magic bags ...”

Bridget waited, but Gray didn’t say anything – she was asleep. And soon, Bridget was too. But oh, what dreams she had that night!

Chapter Ten

Most everyone can imagine what a dungeon would be like. It would be cold, and damp; it would smell stale and musty; it would have spiders, and other scary creatures, crawling around in the corners.

The dungeon that Bridget found herself in was just like that one. It was also kind of crowded. Bridget, Rosie, Elena and Zoe, and Gray and Suzie, stood as close to the center of the room as possible, so that they wouldn't get too close to the creepy crawly things in the corners. Connor and Jordan were there, too. They weren't too happy about being in the dungeon, but they were at least a little happy to have some company; Jordan had smiled when he saw the girls, and Connor looked relieved to have someone to talk to.

The girls didn't want to talk with Connor, though – they wanted to talk to Gray. “Are you all right?” they asked the cats, stroking their fur through the spaces in the webs. “You were really brave!”

“And you were really foolish to come down here,” Gray snapped, causing Connor and Jordan – who weren’t expecting the cat to say anything at all – to jump all the way into the corner.

“Yick!” Connor yelped, as a crawly thing touched his ankle. He grabbed Jordan and hopped back towards the crowd in the middle of the room. “Bridget!” he demanded. “Is that your cat talking?”

“She sure is!” Bridget replied, feeling a flush of pride in her clever cat, even here in the dank dungeon.

“Well – well...” Connor really didn’t know how to respond to that. “Well – what does it say?”

“Why don’t you ask me yourself, Annoying Boy?” Gray cooed.

“Why – why...” Connor was having trouble with his words. “Why do you call me Annoying Boy?” he asked, finally.

“Isn’t that your name?” Gray replied.

“No!” Connor shouted – a little too loudly, since his voice started echoing back from the crawly corners of the dungeon. “My name is Connor,” he said in a quieter voice.

“Sorry – Bridget always calls you ‘Annoying Boy’, so I thought that must be your name” Gray said, as she tried to shift into a comfier position, closing her eyes.

“Yes – well, anyway,” Bridget cut in quickly, “the important thing now is – how do we get out of here?”

Clearly, this was the important thing, and everyone stopped to ponder it. The walls were old, but they seemed solid; the door was made of bars that were too narrow for even a miniature child or a cat to squeeze

through. Beyond the doors were two Judges armed with sharp sticks, keeping guard over the friends, the boys, and the cats.

Suddenly, Bridget had a flash of inspiration. “Hey! Did anyone else put a ladybug in their magic bag?” she asked. Rosie, Elena, and the two boys just shook their heads, but Zoe said “I did – weren’t you supposed to?”

“Good Zoe!” Bridget cried. “If we can shrink down to bug size, we can probably find a way to sneak past the guards and get help!”

“What kind of help are we going to get?” asked Zoe, not unreasonably.

“I don’t know yet. Let’s figure out how to shrink first, and then we’ll decide how to escape,” Bridget replied. “Gray, do you know the spell that gets us to be bug-sized?”

“Not really,” Gray replied, with the tone of a cat who knew that it was better to be using the cat tunnels than the bug tunnels.

“Gray, please – this is important!” Bridget pleaded.

Gray looked like she was gathering herself for another lecture on the inferiority of bug passageways, but then she sighed, and closed her eyes again. “Oh, all right” she said in a sleepy tone. “Do what you did before, only this time, think ‘tiny’ instead of ‘little’”.

“So *that’s* what happens when you think ‘tiny’”, Bridget murmured. Then straightening and looking at Zoe, she said “Are you ready?”

“I guess,” Zoe replied. “Ready or not, here we go!” And with that, the girls hopped, and sneezed, and scrunched their eyes shut, and thought “tiny”. And when they opened their eyes, they could see each other – and the ankles of their friends – and a dozen worm-shaped passages, leading in different directions from the dungeon.

A huge shadow descended on them, punctuated by two enormous eyes. “It worked!” Elena bellowed, in a voice that knocked both Bridget and Zoe flat onto the dungeon floor.

“Elena! Too loud!” Bridget shouted up at her.

“It’s not that loud up here,” Elena replied.

“Well, it is down here. Whisper, will you?” the bug-sized girls asked.

Another shadow landed, and Zoe and Bridget found themselves looking at Rosie’s vast blue eyes. “Do you see any tunnels out of the dungeon?” she asked in the loudest whisper Bridget had ever heard.

“There are a lot of tunnels,” Bridget replied. “We’re going in now – we’ll be back as soon as we can!”

The bug tunnels weren’t as bad as Grey had made them out to be, but they certainly weren’t as nice as the cat tunnels. The bug tunnels had a strange sort of smell, and had sticky places scattered along the walls. They were also narrow, and poorly lit; each appeared to be filled with a shadowy fog just slightly brighter than the surrounding darkness.

“Let’s try that one,” Zoe said, pointing at a passage that was a tiny bit lighter and wider than the others around them. Bridget agreed, and the two girls set off along the way. At one point, they had to wedge themselves into a crack in the wall to make way for a long purple earthworm, but soon they were emerging from the tunnel into one of the larger chambers.

“Where are we?” Zoe asked, clutching at Bridget’s sleeve.

Bridget wasn’t very sure herself – all she could see at first were the feet of two sleeping Judges, the sticks that they had dropped when they

went to sleep, and a vague glow from a window just beyond the Judges' boots. Bridget twisted to see through the grating on the window – and came face to face with a gold pen!

“Zoe!” she hissed. “It’s the treasure room! And I saw your mom’s pen!”

“Great, Bridget!” Zoe trilled. “Let’s find a passageway in!”

This seemed like a wonderful idea to Bridget, but as they poked around, it became obvious to the girls that none of the tunnels led into the treasure room. If they were going to get in, they needed to open the lock on the door – and to open the lock on the door, they needed to be the size of cats, not ladybugs.

“How do we un-shrink?” Zoe asked.

“I don’t know,” Bridget replied. “But to get from people-size to cat-size, we think the word ‘little’, and to get back to people-size, we think ‘big’. Since we used ‘tiny’ in the spell to turn into bug-sized people, maybe we need to use ‘large’ to get back to cat sized again.”

Zoe wasn’t sure that she’d kept up with all of the things that Bridget had said – she was busy looking at things that you only notice when you’re bug-sized – but the last bit made sense. “Okay, then” she said, “let’s try it!”

The girls hopped on one foot, scrunching their eyes, sneezing, and thinking ‘large’. Then they opened their eyes and looked around. Nothing had changed.

“Let’s try ‘larger’” Zoe suggested.

“Okay,” Bridget said. This time when they opened their eyes, they were looking straight down at one of the Judges who was guarding the treasure room.

The Judge awoke with a start. “Hey!” he shouted, waking his companion and grabbing his pointy stick, “you’re not supposed to be here!”

“Of course we are,” said Zoe calmly.

“Then why are you here?”

Zoe and Bridget looked at each other. Bridget’s mind started to say, “we’re here to get back our parents’ things, release our friends from the dungeon, and escape from this horrible place!” That wouldn’t have been a good answer, though, so the four of them just looked at each other as the silence got longer and more uncomfortable. “We’re here to clean the treasure room, just the way Queen Ecce ordered us to,” Bridget said at last.

“Clean the treasure room!” the Judge exclaimed. “Why would anyone want to do that?”

Bridget’s brain couldn’t think of any reason why two girls would suddenly appear to clean a treasure room. Her mouth, though, had a reason right at the tip of her tongue. “We think the floor is made of a rare rose quartz”, Bridget’s mouth was saying. “We need to check it and polish, it, to see if it’s really rare and valuable.”

Zoe looked a little startled at this, but her mouth quickly added, “That’s right. Bridget is a rock expert, and I’m here to make sure that none of the treasure is damaged during the procedure.” Zoe wasn’t entirely sure of what procedure they were talking about, but the word sounded impressive to her.

Apparently, it impressed the two guards as well. “Right, then!” the first one said. “Let us unlock the door” – and with that, he produced a key, turned it in the lock, and slid back the heavy latch – “and then we’ll go and tell the others that you’ve started on your task.

“No! You can’t go!” Bridget said quickly.

“Why not?” the other guard asked.

“Because you have to help us move the treasure. And then polish it while we’re examining the rock. And then move it back in,” Zoe said firmly.

At this, the two guards started grumbling noisily; Judges may be mean, but they’re also very lazy. Before they could start to think of really good excuses for leaving, though, Bridget piped in with, “that’s right! We’d better get started. I’d hate to see Queen Ecce come with wet webs for you two.”

The two guards cringed at the mention of “wet webs”, and were suddenly more eager to help. Without another grumble they swung the door open wide, and started to pull treasures out of the room.

“Look! There’s my mom’s gold pen – and my dad’s watch!” Zoe whispered to Bridget.

“And there’s the blue knapsack that my mom keeps her camera in!” Bridget whispered back. “And look! There’s a pretty vase that came from Rosie’s house. We’d better get the others, and have them find their parents’ treasures.”

“How are we going to do that, with these guards hanging around?” Zoe asked, casting a worried glance at the two Judges, who were pulling the last of the treasures out of the room.

"I have an idea about that," Bridget replied, "but I need you to help me. First, let's look at the floor. Then later, when you see that I'm closer to the door than the two Judges, I need you to call me over."

"Okay," said Zoe. She didn't really see how all of this would work, but she was eager to get their things, and escape. "Let's go!"

Bridget and Zoe walked past piles of treasures – silver bowls, gold watches, jeweled rings, ceremonial swords and daggers, crystal vases, bowling trophies – and into the now-empty treasure room. They knelt down, staring intently at the floor.

"Hmmm," said Bridget, in her best scientific voice. "This certainly isn't sedimentary – most likely, it's metamorphic, though parts of it could be igneous, too."

"Is that good?" asked one Judge from the door.

"Or is it bad?" asked the other, breathlessly.

"I'm not sure yet," Bridget said, "I need to get a clearer look at the crystals. Give me your key, so I can scratch some of the surface rock away."

"Why don't you use one of these ceremonial swords?" the keyholder asked.

"No – a key is just right for this job. Come on, give it to me."

The Judge looked suspicious, but he handed Bridget the key.

"And we'll need you two to examine those rock deposits in the corners," Bridget added.

“Why don’t you look there? You’re the expert,” the second guard retorted.

“Because there are creepy crawly things in the corners, and I don’t want to touch them,” Bridget said, at least a little truthfully. “Also, Zoe and I are working on the main crystal formation here.”

“Can we bring the ceremonial swords to poke at the rocks?” the first Judge asked. He had been admiring the swords ever since he went on guard duty, thinking how nicely they’d go with his key ring and robes.

“No swords,” Bridget responded firmly. “All we need you to do is to push the crawly things away, and look closely for sparkly rocks.”

“Ewww!” said the guards. “We don’t want to touch the crawly things.”

“Well, you’d better,” said Zoe, with a glint in her eye, “or we’ll get Queen Ecce to wrap you up in wet webs – and then the crawly things will be touching you!”

Apparently, the Judges liked this thought even less than work, because they immediately came into the room, and started poking at the corners with the toes of their books. Bridget looked slyly at Zoe.

“Zoe, can you please go out there and see if there’s a flashlight?”

Zoe popped up with a grin, stepped outside the door, and called, “I think there might be one here, Bridget – come help me move this pile.”

As soon as the two girls were outside the room, they grabbed the door. Zoe swung it shut with all her might, and Bridget clicked the key into the lock.

“Hey!” the Judges screamed in unison. “Don’t leave us in here with the crawly things!”

“Yep, you have to stay in there with the crawly things all right,” Bridget cooed. “But we’ll be back soon – with our friends, and two big, angry cats.”

When Bridget turned back from the door, she saw that Zoe was holding a big, bright sword from the treasure pile. “I think I’ll take this with us,” she said, “and maybe you should take that light”

Bridget dug into the pile, and picked up a fancy lantern that had been hidden under a clump of pearl necklaces. “Do you mean this one?” she asked.

“Does it work?” Zoe said in response.

Bridget clicked a switch, and a strong beam of light shone back towards the room, blinding the guards who were still staring at them through the grating in the locked door. “Yep, it works all right,” she said.

“Good – that will be helpful in the bug passages on the way back,” Zoe said, “and THIS,” pointing to the sword, “will come in handy on the other end. Ready?”

“Ready!” Bridget smiled back. The two hopped on one foot, thought ‘tiny’, and sneezed – and then they, the lantern, and the sword were all small enough to follow the ladybug trails.

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