

Chapter 10

Something else happens

Next morning Grampa was up early and looked out of his window. The haar had cleared completely. It was a glorious day. The sky and the ocean were still tinted red from the sunrise.

Grampa started counting the islands, but he soon stopped counting because he had noticed something else. The islands farthest away, around the mouth of the loch, had all moved. They had closed ranks. They were so close together that Grampa could see hardly any space between them. It looked just as if the loch were completely land-locked, with a solid strip of land now intervening between the loch and the sea. "What the jolly jiggers is going on?" said Grampa to himself.

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At breakfast that morning Grizzelda was saying she must go back to Blair Bear. She had found herself surprisingly at ease in the MacBear household, where she was left to do as she wished and looked after as much as she needed. If it had not been for the worrying reason she was there she would have been feeling unusually happy. But Grizzlette was on her mind all the time, and she was anxious to see whether she might have returned home. In any case, she needed to be doing something.

"Must," she announced.

Duff, Beth and Tosh offered to go with her.

Grampa said, "You must look to see if there's any faery gold at Blair Bear." And, turning to Mother MacBear, he added: "We must keep an eye on Baby Brother all the time and not let him go out."

"I wonder if we should lock the door," said Mother MacBear. No one in Bearloch ever locked a door.

"He'd be happiest if you locked him in the honey pantry," said Tosh.

"Unny, unny, unny," said Baby Brother.

"Oh, and keep an eye on the Rumbling Roller too," said Duff.

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Before long Grizzelda and the three bearns were on the gravel path that led up to the front of Blair Bear. Duff stopped. He had noticed a line of footprints leading from the path. They looked to be those of a medium-sized animal, certainly not a bear's. And they led towards the back of the house.

"This might be the way the kidnapper went," said Duff. "But we must be careful. There could be someone there now."

So they walked cautiously round to the back of the house, where the footprints led to one of the back doors. It was open.

They ducked down below the windows and crept along to the door. Then a very surprising sound came from behind the door - a huge sigh. Duff, who was at the front of the group, took a step back - on to Beth's toe, as it happened.

Everything then happened quickly. Beth cried out. A voice from inside the room shouted, "Who's there? In the name of the law..." PC Bobby-on-the-Beat appeared in the doorway, brandishing his truncheon. Before he saw who was there, he had lunged at them. Duff, to avoid the blow, fell back onto Beth, who fell back onto Grizzelda, who fell back onto Tosh, who fell back onto the ground. A perfect domino effect.

Bobby had been searching the house for clues but had found nothing. He had been feeling very sorry for himself, when the bears approached. Not only did he have no suspects. He also had no clues.

Standing in the doorway, looking past the heap of bears, Bobby noticed the line of footprints - not those of the bears, which kept close to the wall of the house, but the footprints the bears had noticed, leading to the door he was standing by.

For a moment he felt elated. Here at last was something that might solve the case. There were no footprints leading away from the door. The murderer must still be in the house!

But it was only a moment before Bobby realised whose footprints they were. He sighed again, this time with a mixture of disappointment and relief - relief that at least he had not said out loud what he had so stupidly thought. He could just imagine the bearns chuckling to each other: "a badger of very little brain."

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Grizzelda felt obliged to make them all some coffee, though she drew the line at offering Bobby whisky.

"Wallpaper," she said. "Must excuse."

They were all in a glum mood and there seemed little to say until Beth, glancing out of the window, saw the horse. It was cantering up the path to the house. It was the first time they had seen it move.

"We must go out to the horse," said Beth, though she had no idea what made her say it. Looking out of the window, they all had a sense that the horse was commanding their presence.

The horse stopped short of the steps to the front porch and waited, silently as usual, for the bears and the badger to come out. It stood stock still, its big eyes fixed on them as they stood at the top of the steps in front of it. It was hard for them to tell whether they stopped still there from caution or because the horse required it of them.

They now had time to notice its unusually long neck. The more they looked at it, the less like a real horse it seemed.

Then Beth became aware that she was now the sole object of the creature's silent but expressive stare. Oddly she was not afraid. As though the horse had spoken, the knowledge came to her that she was being invited to go with it. Then the horse knelt, and Beth had no choice at all. She ran down the steps and mounted the horse. She found there was a rope of sea-weed round its neck that she could hold onto.

"No, Beth, no," cried Duff in sheer terror, as Beth ran down the steps. They grabbed at her, but she was already gone. In a moment the horse was galloping towards the loch. They ran but were left far behind.

As the horse plunged into the loch, they had no doubt Beth was doomed.

But the horse did not disappear into the loch, as they would have expected a kelpie dragging its prey to its lair would have done. It moved, surprisingly rapidly, across the surface of the loch, keeping Beth on its back just above the surface. The neck seemed even longer. Was the creature still a horse at all - or some gargantuan monster of the loch, gigantic under the water? The long neck stretching ahead of Beth and the horse-like head were now its only visible parts.

"It must have a lair among the islands. It must be taking her there," said Tosh.

"What can we do?" said Duff, mainly addressing the policeman. Once again Bobby found himself clueless. None of his favourite detectives ever had to deal with a case like this. Bobby-on-the-Beat was as out of his depth as Beth was out of hers.