

Chapter 15

New guests

Grizzelda had stayed at the Den with Mother MacBear when the others took Grampa's boat across the loch. When Beth as well as Grizzlette was lost, the two mothers shared the worry and the fear. Then, when both their daughters came home, they shared their joy.

This was one of the ways in which the events of that day changed life in Bearloch. From the time that Grizzelda had turned to the MacBears for help, she had had to give up her habit of competent busyness and keeping up appearances. At the Den she allowed herself to be looked after and rather liked it. And in their shared grief and joy Grizzelda and Mother MacBear became friends.

Grizzelda thought she should take Grizzlette home to Blair Bear, but Mother MacBear would not hear of it. "You must stay a little longer and help me with these new guests," she said.

The new guests were the conservationists. People were a little surprised that the MacBears should have them to stay, after what they had done. But Mother MacBear loved having guests, the weirder the better.

The names of the conservationists were quite a mouthful. The leader of the team was Professor Joulette Pondicherry. Her two assistants were Dr Darlington Watt and Dr Ozone Bostock. Dr Darlington Watt was commonly known as Darling, while Dr Ozone Bostock was known to his friends as Aztec. Professor Joulette Pondicherry was known to everyone only as Professor Pondicherry.

They were from the biology department of the University of Cheshire, where Professor Pondicherry had first made her name with a ground-breaking study of the population levels of the Cheshire cat.

In their strange condition of excitement and exhaustion, the conservationists were content to rest for a while in the quiet comfort of the Den. Mother MacBear's camomile tea, honey cakes, lentil soup, fish stew, gooseberry syllabub, and blackberry and cowberry pie with custard calmed and nourished them back to something like health.

Of course, they would never be the same again. They were forever scarred by an experience they always thought themselves unbelievably lucky to have had. Every week of their lives they would wake from nightmare replays of it, terrified and elated at the same time.

By comparison Tosh was only mildly scarred. He had only glimpsed the terror. But he did not, like the conservationists, find it thrilling. He too would sometimes wake from nightmares and would climb into his brother's bed for comfort.

All the same he felt very proud of having seen the Rumbling Roller, as none of the other bears had done. It became rather useful to him to be able to say, at times when he needed to keep up his spirits or his side of an argument, "I'm the bear who saw the Rumbling Roller and lived to tell the tale."

Beth too had had a remarkable experience unique to her, but she did not talk about it much. There had been no fear in it. She remembered her complete trust in the kelpie, her confidence in its kindness, and her strange feeling of knowing its mind. She often thought of this. It was a bright memory that her imagination cherished.

*

Grizzlette was put to bed in the best guest room, the one on the second floor of the tower. Everyone was kind to her, even Tosh. Her mother kept saying things like, "Brave. Relief. So worried. Love you." She was allowed fudge doughnuts and very sticky yum-yums at elevenses and afternoon tea time every day. She spent much of her time reading school stories with titles like *Jessica Spills the Beans* and *Angela Pulls it Off*.

It was a while before she felt well enough to talk of her experience, but once she started it was hard to stop her.

"It was absolutely vile," she said to Duff and Beth one day. "They kept measuring me and poking around in my ears and my mouth. Worse than matron. So in the end I bit that beastly woman. If I'd had my hockey stick I'd have finished her off. Putrid creature.

"After that they kept me in that ghastly cage all the time. They just watched me and made notes. I told them how frightfully degrading it was for someone of my sort to be treated like that, but they wouldn't listen.

"The worst thing was: they wouldn't let me eat anything I like. No honey, no pancakes, no dumplings, no muffins, no puddings, not even jam doughnuts. They just gave me broccoli and carrots and turnips and mouldy old stuff like that. They said I was overweight.

"I would have starved to death if I'd had to stay there another day.

"But you saved me, Duff. That was spiffing. You were so clever. All that stuff with the Rumbling Roller. Positively astute. No one would have guessed you'd never been to school.

"And you were pretty good too, Beth. Frightfully plucky."

Duff and Beth smiled. "You were really brave too, Grizzlette," said Beth.

"Oh yes, I know. I lived up to everything everyone expects of a Grizzly. I expect I'll be mobbed when I go back to school. It's going to be awfully jolly."

*

"I had to get out of the house, drat it!" Grampa was sitting with Wompy in the roof garden of Wompy's house.

"And you don't need to tell me I shouldn't be grouching. I know I've had what I wanted. Something certainly happened. The jiggers it did! As much excitement as anyone could want. Enough to last me till I become extinct. I know all that. You've told me that often enough to make a bear more than grumpy.

"But now it's those dratted conservationists. Now they've rested a bit, they never stop talking. They're so excited all the time, fizzing over with it, like Baby Brother's icecream soda when he blows down the straw. All about saving endangered species.

"They keep asking me whether I don't think we're close to extinction. I tell them, I know *I'm* close to extinction, but I'll be jiggered if it bothers me. You're even closer to extinction, you know, Wompy."

Wompy thought it might be a good idea to change the subject. "Have you noticed how the islands have moved back to their old positions?" he said.

"Aye, of course, I noticed it first thing this morning. I'd go and bring the dratted conservationists' boat into the loch if I thought it would get them to leave." Grampa was not going to be easily distracted from his grumpiness.

Wompy remembered what had worked last time. "We should start thinking about the haiku contest again," he said. "It's not long to the closing date now."

"Recent events ought to inspire some haiku, eh?"

"No, not at all. Old friend, you've still not understood what haiku are. Haiku are not about big and eventful things." (Clomp!) "You can't get those things into seventeen syllables.

"Haiku are about the little things, the things that happen around us all the time, the things we don't notice when we're preoccupied with excitement." (Clomp!)

"It will be a long time," he continued, "before the conservationists will be able to write haiku, if they ever do. They're still much too excited about seeing the Rumbling Roller. They can't notice anything else."

Grampa was greatly cheered by the thought that haiku were beyond the reach of the conservationists. He resolved to turn his mind to the remarkable in the ordinary and the everyday.