

## Chapter 5

### Grizzelda

The castle known as Blair Bear stood on the southwest shore of the loch, within a forest of Scots pines and hairy birch trees. It was a sprawling building that had grown in stages over many centuries. It looked as though bits of many buildings have been accidentally thrown together in a heap. It had eight turrets of quite different shapes and sizes.

It was the ancestral home of the Grizzlies, Bearloch's other family of bears. At one time, when such things mattered, they had been the lairds of Bearloch.

Mrs Mairi MacSheep had walked all the way from the village and was feeling a little tired when she reached the steps up to the imposing front porch.

When she rang the door bell Grizzelda Grizzly stuck her head out of a distant upstairs window. That she was annoyed to be troubled was obvious in the way she shouted, "Hello?"

Mairi had to step outside the porch to see her. "Mrs Grizzly," she said. "I'm so sorry to trouble you. I am organizing the house-to-house collection for the Homeless Hares and Destitute Ducks. I do hope you will be able to help."

"Sorry. Busy. Daughter. Must rush. Lovely day." This clipped way of speaking was Grizzelda's usual one. She rarely spoke a proper sentence. It was part of the air of busyness she cultivated.

Grizzelda's head disappeared and Mairi MacSheep sniffed as though it was no more than one could expect of Grizzelda.

But before she left, Mairi found some satisfaction in observing the peeling paint on Grizzelda's front door. The house was grand but very shabby, whereas Mairi's own little house was always spick and span.

What Grizzelda had meant was that her daughter Grizzlette was coming home from boarding school for the summer holidays. Grizzelda was in a great fluster of cooking and cleaning.

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As Mairi MacSheep was leaving the castle grounds through the great entrance gate, she passed Grampa and Beth on their way in. It had occurred to them that Grizzelda, who kept herself to herself, may not have heard of the haiku contest. So

they were taking her one of the notices. Grampa thought it his duty to give everyone in Bearloch the chance to enter.

"Grampa," said Beth. "Why does Mrs Grizzly let the house get into such a state? Bits of it are almost falling down."

"Eccentricity, I suppose," said Grampa. "She's rather odd, you know. I haven't been in the house for years. She never lets anyone in. Not since her husband went off in our boat with your father. I always thought Grizzly was mostly to blame for that. Your father would never have had such an idea himself."

"But you'd think she'd be lonely, with Grizzlette away at school. You'd think she'd welcome visitors."

"Snobbery," said Grampa with distaste. "She thinks she's superior to everyone else. Or maybe she thinks we'd steal all her valuable things. She's got some wonderful old stuff, you know. Must be worth a jiggering fortune."

"I think it's very sad," said Beth. "She must be lonely really. We should do something about it."

Grampa was ringing the door bell.

"Let's ask her to tea," said Beth, while they waited. It was a long time before they heard an upstairs window open. They stepped out of the porch to look.

"Busy," was all Grizzelda said before slamming the window.

"If people want to be alone you have to let them be," said Grampa as they stuffed the notice in the letter box.

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There was something that people didn't know about Grizzelda. She was no longer wealthy. The Grizzlies had been running short of cash even before Grizzly left home with most of what remained. His wife was left to cope alone with the crumbling house and her daughter's school fees.

She kept people out of the house because she was ashamed of the rising damp, the tattered curtains and the worn upholstery. From time to time she pasted bits of peeling wallpaper back onto the walls and tried to plug the leaks in the roof. But she could not halt the decay.

She had sold what she could bear to part with. The eighteenth-century French tapestries (depicting scenes from the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears) and the famous painting of St Francis and the bear (school of Giotto) had gone long ago. No one wanted the family portraits.

But Grizzelda was driven by the proud and independent instincts of generations of Grizzlies. It was natural to her to carry on regardless and to keep up

appearances as best she could. This is why she sent Grizzlette to boarding school, even though she could not afford it.

"Do you a world of good," she said to her daughter. "Teach you to stand on your own feet," she repeated when Grizzlette complained she was homesick. Grizzlette could not understand how one could possibly stand on any feet but one's own.

It was hard to be a Grizzly. Grizzelda often envied the MacBears. It seemed so easy to be a MacBear. The MacBears didn't care a weasel's whisker for what anyone else thought of them. Like Grizzelda, they were generally thought a little eccentric. But everyone liked them. Mother MacBear kept open house for all and sundry, and seemed to enjoy having even the most difficult guests. Grizzelda could only shut herself up alone in her ruinous house.

Of course, she didn't let herself mope. She kept busy. "Must rush," she always said after passing the time of day with Sally MacSeal or with Fat Fiona the postman's daughter when they met in the village. Sometimes she said just "Must" or "Rush."

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Later that day Grizzelda was at her favourite spot for fishing. On the southern shore of Bearloch a rocky promontory stuck out into the loch and a chain of small rocks ventured even further out. Grizzelda had to clamber over the rocks in her green wellies in order to reach one that was just right for sitting comfortably with a fishing rod.

Once there Grizzelda was happy. Facing out towards the sea she saw nothing but water and sky and the rocky outlines of the islands near the mouth of the loch. Here alone she could be herself. With the sea gulls and the fish there were no appearances to keep up.

Somehow being alone here did not feel at all like loneliness. It was a very positive kind of solitude. This afternoon the wind blew small ripples across the whole surface of the loch. Grizzelda felt calmed by the gentle movement.

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Then she had to go to meet Grizzlette from the ghost train.

The ghost train was one of the more unusual features of Bearloch. Long ago, before these lands were so totally forgotten by the outside world, there had been a railway line that snaked its way around the coast and the shore of the loch and came to an end at a station in the village. Long ago the railway was closed and disused, and

even the track was removed. But after a while the people of Bearloch became aware of the ghost train.

Every night the ghost of a train appeared, following the route of the old railway, stopping for a while in Bearloch station and then returning. It was not as scary as people thought at first, because there were no ghostly people on it - no driver or guards, no passengers. The train itself was the only ghost, and people got quite used to it coming and going every night.

Then one night an unusually intrepid sheep actually tried boarding the train - not at all a sheepish thing to do - and found it could be done.

So it was that people from Bearloch started to ride the ghost train. It became the main route to the world beyond Bearloch, though only for a few. Most Bearloch animals had no wish to leave their familiar territory. But for those who did, the ghost train proved extremely useful.

Take Wompy, for instance. He hated crossing from the forgotten lands into the known world, where it seemed to him people live such mad lives nowadays. But all the same he sometimes took the ghost train to towns where he could visit dusty secondhand bookshops and rummage through the mouldering volumes on market stalls. Then he would return to Bearloch with new stores of tales to tell.

As for Grizzlette, she attended a genteel academy for young ladies, somewhere on the borders of the forgotten lands.

The ghost train travelled only at night, and the only people who could see it were those who remembered the old railway and really missed it. So the ghost train was rarely seen by other eyes in the glens and villages it passed through. Bearloch people could travel on it almost invisibly. The secrecy of Bearloch was preserved.