

Chapter 6

Grizzlette

Along the path from Blair Bear to the village waddled Grizzlette. There is no other word for it: she waddled. Like a duck. Unlike her mother, who was unusually tall and slender for a bear, Grizzlette was small and plump. She was wearing her school uniform: a bright pink blazer and a white pleated skirt.

After three days of her holiday, she was bored and in search of company her own age. But she would never have admitted that she was looking for the MacBear bears. She looked down on children who did not go to school.

She was dragging a hockey stick. From time to time, when she thought people might be looking, she swung it as though she were playing the game.

Suddenly a small bear wearing a yellow tartan kilt and a yellow tammie perched on one ear jumped out of a bush into the path right in front of Grizzlette. It was Tosh.

"What's that you've got?" he demanded to know. "I've never seen one of those. You could use it for beating off kidnappers."

"Are there kidnappers?" There was a slight tremble in Grizzlette's voice.

"Of course. Behind every bush. They'll carry you off and keep you in a deep, dark, pongy hole until your mother pays them an enormous ransom."

Tosh jumped up and down with glee as he spoke.

As though on cue from Tosh, two figures wearing black masks appeared from behind bushes. One of them wielded a large fishing net in which they could certainly have caught Tosh. They might have tried it on Grizzlette had she not at that moment raised her hockey stick in the air and charged at them.

The masked figures fled, while Grizzlette, breaking into a fast waddle, pursued, and Tosh jumped up and down, clapping and chortling. Baby Brother crawled out of a bush and gurgled his own sort of laughter.

Grizzlette pursued the kidnappers all the way to the Den, where Grampa MacBear was sitting in a deckchair in the garden, trying to compose the finest haiku in Bearloch.

"Catch them! They're kidnappers," yelled Grizzlette. But Grampa merely smiled as the two masked figures entered the house by the front door and closed it behind them.

Grizzlette would have plunged straight after them, hockey stick raised. But Grampa, in his most authoritative voice, required her to leave the offensive weapon in the porch.

Fortunately at that moment Mother MacBear came out. Peeping timidly out from behind her were the kidnappers. They pulled off their masks and revealed themselves to be Duff and Beth. The bears had been playing a game.

Mother MacBear smoothed things over and put everything right in the way that only mothers can.

*

Grizzlette stayed for breakfast. They had all had breakfast already, but it was too early for anything else, and so they had second breakfast. Grizzlette ate almost as many of Mother MacBear's famous seaweed pancakes as Baby Brother did.

"Super pancakes!" said Grizzlette, while Mother MacBear took the breakfast things away to wash up.

"Listen, I've got a wizard story to tell you. Mama and I had an absolutely spiffing adventure. It was the night I came home. Mama came to meet me off the ghost train and we had to do that long walk from the village to Blair Bear in the dark. It's always a bit eerie. Walking along by the loch, especially. You hear of frightfully awful things coming out of the loch at dead of night."

At this point Tosh, who didn't think much of Grizzlette, started taking notice.

"We'd borrowed Desdemona's little luggage cart for my case, and I was wheeling it while Mama held the torch. The cart was a bit noisy, with my case rattling around on it. So we couldn't hear anything else too well.

"But then I stopped for a moment and I thought I heard a sound coming from somewhere behind us. Mama heard it too. It was a sort of clip-clopping. But it stopped very soon.

"I wanted to know if it would happen again. So I stopped a few times. Each time we could hear the clop-clipping just briefly before it stopped too. And it seemed to be getting nearer.

"I could see Mama was getting nervous. Positively palpitating! So I took the torch and shone it back behind us. Nothing to be seen. Just a whopping lot of darkness. But after that the clip-clopping seemed to stop.

"Until we got to the Blair Bear entrance gate. You know the path then goes through the forest and the trees haven't been cut back for centuries and centuries, probably. It's dark as a dungeon. Mama always says it's spooky even in the daytime.

"Then we heard the clop-clipping coming towards us. Quite fast. Mama sort of swallowed a shriek and pulled me behind the nearest trees. I fell over and she just dragged me by the paw. She was palpitating like a pendulum."

"Pendulums don't palpitate," said Tosh. This stopped Grizzlette in her flow and gave Duff the chance to break in too:

"Was it clop-clipping or clip-clopping? You don't seem very sure."

"Does it matter? I just mean it sounded like a horse cantering."

"Was it a horse?" said Grampa.

"It was weird. We couldn't really see what it was. Well, Mama didn't even look. It came clip-clopping along. It must have stopped where we'd left the cart. I peeped out, and whatever it was was black. So I couldn't see it properly. Just the head. The head seemed to rise out of the darkness and it was turned towards me. I couldn't actually see its eyes but I just knew it was staring at me.

"It was a bit ghastly, but frightfully exciting too. Spiffing. I'm going to tell the girls at school after lights-out in the dormitory. D'you think I've made it scary enough? I think it might have been a ghost horse. We never see horses round here now, but Mama says there used to be horses at Blair Bear in the grand old days. That was when we were even richer than we are now, and our forebears used to ride out to receive the homage of our subjects."

"You mean: *their* subjects," said Duff.

"And I don't suppose they put up with quibbling," said Grizzlette, haughtily.

"I expect they just rode down to the village to collect the milk and the newspaper," said Tosh.

"But you haven't finished the story," said Grampa.

"I have really. Well, it just stood there staring and staring, and I was getting very cold but I couldn't move, and Mama was sort of whimpering. She pulled me away. Otherwise I think I could have been stuck there for hours. I might have turned to stone. Or a pillar of salt."

Tosh opened his mouth to speak but didn't.

"When I looked again, it was gone. Mama was in a silly twitter all the way to the house, and I had to make her hot cocoa and put her to bed."

Grizzlette looked round to admire the effect of her story. She had certainly held her audience. But they had their own reason, unknown to Grizzlette, for taking a great interest in her story. They exchanged knowing looks but said nothing about it.

"You were very brave, Grizzlette," said Grampa.

"Wasn't I? Absolutely fearless, I'd say. I can't wait to tell the girls at school."

And so the talk turned to Grizzlette's school. None of the other bears knew anything about schools and they were keen to hear.

To anyone outside Bearloch it would be something of a puzzle that the inhabitants of Bearloch managed quite well without schools. The MacBear bears could read well and write well and knew all sorts of facts and skills. Somehow they had picked up whatever interested them. As a result they were not, it is true, very good at algebra or economic history, but they knew a great many good stories and songs. They could fish and sail and chop wood. From Wompy they learned all kinds of rather incredible things that not many other people know.

"At the Beardean Academy," Grizzlette was telling them, "we play hockey or netball every afternoon. I am exceedingly good at hockey. Jolly ripping actually. I wish I were back at school. It's frightfully boring here. There's nothing to do.

"And there are no rules. At Beardean we have heaps and heaps of rules: no talking after lights out, no running in the corridors, no climbing the drainpipes, no sniffing at the dining table, no yawning during extra maths, no nessesies in the bath, no anything at all before breakfast, and fudge doughnuts never ever ever!"

"Why do they have so many rules?" asked Beth, astonished.

"It's part of an education," said Grizzlette confidently. "People can't grow up properly without lots of rules."

"Don't you ever break them?" said Tosh.

"Oh yes, we have pillow fights every week. It's very jolly. But it wouldn't be much fun if there wasn't a rule to be broken. Last term we put slugs in matron's porridge every morning until she promised to buy us all fudge doughnuts on her birthday. What a lark!"

"Isn't school about learning things?" said Grampa.

"Oh yes, we're learning to be young ladies. There's deportment and manners and elocution. We're being educated for our proper station in life."

"I suppose there must be lots of stations the ghost train stops at," said Tosh. "You could make a lot of money selling coffee and scones at a station.

"Or I guess you could clean the toilets." But he shut up when Duff kicked him.

"Children who don't go to school," continued Grizzlette, "have no prospects."

"But here at the Den we have very fine prospects," said Grampa. "From my room at the top of the tower you can see the whole jiggering loch and even the open sea. Apart from Wompy's observatory, it must have the best prospect in Bearloch."

"It's really very difficult talking to people who haven't had an education," concluded Grizzlette. "I think Mama is expecting me for luncheon."

As soon as the door closed behind her, Tosh said, "That girl is so stuck up you'd need a fire-engine's ladder to get her down."