

Chapter 3

The Midsummer banquet

Midsummer Eve came at last. In Bearloch at this time of year there was almost perpetual light. The sun set but the sky only dimmed for a few hours at night. This was cause for celebration in Bearloch, where the opposite was true in midwinter. But this was not all that was celebrated. The departure of the bishbirds from Bearloch, so long ago that no one knew how long, had happened on Midsummer Eve. Or so the legend went. All the customs of this night recalled the bishbirds.

"I saw a bishbird once," said Wee Billy MacGoat. He was sitting with the MacBears and their guests around the big table on which they were eating their Midsummer banquet.

There were murmurs of surprise and disbelief. Bishbirds had not been seen in Bearloch since the legendary past.

"It was sitting on the roof of our house," said Billy. "I said to it, 'You're a bishbird, aren't you?' It said, 'I might be. But then again I might not. I might be an osprey or a Caledonian bat or a figment of your imagination.' I think it was trying to confuse me. Only a bishbird would do that, wouldn't it?"

"Bishbirds are devious, that's true," said Duff.

"Caledonian bats can be quite mischievous," said Beth.

"Perhaps it was a puffin with an identity crisis," Tosh suggested.

They were too polite to say what they all knew: that Wee Billy MacGoat often made up his stories. Rumours that spread around Bearloch before turning out to be untrue could often be traced back to him.

Along with the MacBear family's friends, Mother MacBear liked to invite to the Midsummer banquet a few of the people in Bearloch who were a little odd or difficult. Just because they didn't fit in, she always said, was no reason for leaving them out.

So this year she had invited Bobby MacGoat, who was thought to be just a little bit crazy. He was difficult to talk to because his mind always seemed to be somewhere else. Along with him came his son Wee Billy, who seemed never to grow up, and his daughter Wee Nanny, who, when she wasn't howling with rage, was laughing uncontrollably, usually at some private joke of her own.

Also a couple of people who had not been invited had turned up anyway, knowing that at the MacBears' they'd be welcome.

The MacBears had taken the big dining room table up onto the flat roof of the first storey of the Den, so that they and their guests could enjoy the view. They could see, down on the shore near the village, the big Midsummer bonfire blazing. It would burn all through the night.

The food had taken Mother MacBear days to prepare. The main dishes were cullen skink with honeycomb noodles, mackerel and tatties cooked in honey, followed by seaweed compote with honey sauce, and raspberry and honey cloutie dumpling. When cooking for special occasions, Mother MacBear kept in mind the old adage her husband used often to quote: "Nothing is so good that honey can't make it even better."

The guests who were not bears did not all agree with this, and so Mother MacBear also provided plenty of other food. The climax of the meal would be the Midsummer cake. There was competition between Bearloch families as to who could bake the biggest cake for Midsummer. So every year the MacBears' cake got a little bigger.

Before the cake, Wompy was expected to remind everyone of the meaning of the Midsummer customs.

"Some people in Bearloch," he began, "think the bishbirds are only a legend and claim that bishbirds have never really existed, in Bearloch or anywhere else. But you all know how I treasure the three bishbird feathers that are the only tangible relic of the bishbirds that we have. Small but undeniable evidence they really were here once.

"The bishbirds, as you know, were as tall as a brown bear. The glittering bright colours of their feathers made them stunningly beautiful. They were the biggest and most splendid birds that have ever been seen in these Far Northern Lands. But their long legs and the way they walked with high steps and their feet turned outwards also made them rather comic.

"Not that anyone dared laugh at a bishbird. They ruled Bearloch with an iron beak. On their island on the loch they lived in luxury provided by all the other animals around here.

"The bishbirds were excessively fond of cake. No one else in Bearloch was allowed to eat cake. Cakes could be baked only for the bishbirds. Of course, this is

why we eat the Midsummer cake and why it has to be big. Ever since the bishbirds left, we have celebrated at this meal the freedom to eat cake.

"The bishbirds were long-lived but yearned to live for ever. They came up with the idea that if they flew west they might keep ahead of the sun and never see it set. Perhaps they would find a land where the sun never sets.

"There are stories about the island far away in the Northern Ocean where they finally settled. Some sailors have claimed to have visited it. But that was centuries ago. Probably they were just the tall tales that sailors tell.

"When they left Bearloch they set fire to their magnificent nests. That's why we have the big bonfire burning through the night. After they left their island in the loch disappeared, as we all know islands in our loch sometimes do.

"When we cook herrings in the bonfire as we will later tonight we commemorate the last meal the bishbirds had before leaving at sunrise on Midsummer Day. It was the last food they extorted from the creatures of Bearloch. Now we eat it ourselves."

Wompy stamped one of his big hind feet and cried, "Bring in the Midsummer cake!" He sat down to watch its ceremonious arrival.

"Such a pity Grizzly's not here," said Grizzly's wife Grizzelda. The custom had been that the Midsummer cake was piped in. Grizzly would walk ahead of it playing the bagpipes, but there was no one else among them who could do this now.

The cake was brought to the table by the three older MacBear bears. The Midsummer cake was always a surprise because every year Mother MacBear made new decorations for it. This year there were bishbirds with turquoise and indigo wings outstretched, flying over the cake, their feet barely touching it. People gasped and exclaimed in admiration and clapped. Mother MacBear beamed.

Then there was an odd whirring sound and the cake exploded.