

Chapter 2

Brownies

The three older bears were visiting Wompy. Wompy was a blue hare who was even older than Grampa MacBear. He was the local storyteller and the bears loved to hear his stories. He told them all sorts of things he thought they should know in order to be properly educated bears.

They were all sitting in Wompy's library. Just being in Wompy's library was an education. It was a big circular room with bookshelves all around the walls. Scattered around the room were all kinds of objects Wompy had collected to help him with his stories. Some of these were very strange.

There was a weird machine that Wompy said came from the moon. Not even Wompy knew what it was for. There was a hatstand with dozens of different hats and headdresses that Wompy would wear when he was playing different parts in his stories.

The most precious objects were kept in a glass case. They were three feathers. One was fluffy and emerald green; the others were silky and kingfisher blue. They were bishbird feathers. They had been handed down in Wompy's family from the time, very long ago, when bishbirds lived in Bearloch.

The bears were telling Wompy about extreme Pooh sticks, which Wompy had never played.

"Father would be able to help us play it," said Duff. "It's the sort of thing Father was good at." Duff noticed he had said "was."

"Mr Wompy," he said. "Could you tell us about what happened to Father? I always wonder whether Mother and Grampa are keeping something from us. But I don't like to ask them any more because I know it upsets them."

"Unfortunately no one knows any more than you do," said Wompy. "It was about six months after Baby Brother was born. Your Father and his friend Grizzly from Bear Blair had gone out in the fishing boat. They hadn't told anyone they were going.

"When I looked for them with my telescope, I saw them far out in the ocean, heading northwest. They never came back.

"Your Grampa thinks it must have been Grizzly's idea. Grizzly's a dark horse - if a brown bear can be a dark horse. You never knew what he was thinking.

But Mungo - your Father - was always very restless. He wanted adventures.

"I remember even when he was a wee bearn - Baby Brother's age - he once dragged a big wooden pail down the beach and floated out into the loch. Luckily the dolphins brought him back.

"He'll come back some time, Duff. When he's ready. I'm sure he will."

Wompy thumped one of his big hind feet on the floor, as he did when he wanted to indicate that something he said was important.

"Now," he said, "I think it is time I told you something about brownies."

"Are we going to make some for the Midsummer banquet?" asked Beth.

"Silly wee lassie!" said Wompy kindly. "Not the sort of brownies you eat. Your mother can tell you about those. I gave up baking them because hers were always so much better than mine.

"The brownies I want to tell you about are creatures - shy wee creatures who haunt the dark corners of big old houses. They are also very useful. They will do all sorts of jobs around the house. If you have one in your house, you can just leave the washing-up at night and it will be done by morning. In return, they want only a small gift of food and milk daily.

"Now I'll tell you a story. Quite a long time ago there was a brownie at Blair Bear. His name was Bramble. He was centuries old, very old even for a brownie, and at last he was getting too old to manage the household jobs properly.

"He became careless and clumsy. He would sweep the dust under the carpet and was always dropping plates. The family - Grizzly's grandparents they were - didn't know what to do. Brownies are very proud and easily offended by any criticism of their work.

"The Grizzlies would have liked to pension him off, but brownies will take nothing other than their simple daily fare.

"Then things got worse. Bramble's niece Begonia came to stay. Begonia loved practical jokes. Her parents had thrown her out because they could no longer stand her jokes.

"The Grizzlies did a lot of entertaining and often had weekend house parties. After Begonia had joined the household, guests would find frogs in their beds or would step out of bed into a bowl of icy water. Then they would hear 'Tee-hee, tee-hee,' from behind a curtain or from the top of a wardrobe. Sometimes she swapped all the guests' clothes around while they slept.

"Eventually the Grizzlies had to confront the two brownies. Begonia was very upset to realise that her uncle might be turned out on her account. So she offered to help with the housework.

"They struck a bargain: Begonia would help Bramble around the house, and Begonia would be allowed to do just one practical joke at every house party.

"The guests were warned that this would happen and it became a feature of the parties. Everyone enjoyed the joke, and the victims would put up with it for the sake of general entertainment. Begonia was brilliant at inventing a new joke for every house party.

"There was one time when all the guests, retiring to their bedrooms at the end of their first evening at Blair Bear, found notices in their rooms:

IMPORTANT. PLEASE DO NOT LOOK UNDER THE BED

Of course, there was nothing under the bed. But few of the guests were brave enough to search in the dark under the bed for what might be there. Most of them, trying to imagine what could be the reason for the notice, got themselves seriously frightened thinking about it. Some left their rooms and camped out in the drawing room for the night. It was a rather cruel joke."

Here Tosh interrupted. "That's really cool," he said admiringly.

"Eventually," Wompy continued, "Bramble died and then Begonia moved on. And that's nearly the end of my story. But before I go on, would you like to meet a real brownie?"

"Ooh, yes!" chorused the bears.

"Brownies hate to be seen," said Wompy, "and so they have learned to fade into the background so that no one even notices them."

"Tee-hee! tee-hee!" This rather croaking little giggle came from somewhere in the room. The bairns looked all around but could see no one.

"Let me introduce Begonia," said Wompy with a big smile.

Begonia materialized out of a shadow and stepped forward a little, but only a little. It was obvious she was shy.

She was a small creature in shabby brownish clothes. Under her shaggy mop of thick, reddish-brown hair they could see her little brown face. It was the wrinkliest face they had ever seen.

"Begonia has come back to Bearloch to remind herself of where she lived as a child," said Wompy. "And she's come to see me because she remembers me as a very small leveret. Of all the animals she knew in Bearloch, I'm the only one who's still alive. And that's the end of my story."

Begonia started to fade again, but Tosh was determined to talk to her. He had the advantage of being the only one of them who was as small as Begonia. He followed her behind one of the big armchairs, and the others heard much chatter in low voices, punctuated by an occasional "Tee-hee!"

They decided to leave them to it and climbed the spiral staircase to Wompy's roof garden. Wompy wanted to show the bears a very strange plant his friend Waverley Bear had sent him. "At last," he told them, " I have a hairy haggis plant."