

Chapter 5

Bears at sea

"Serendipity!" said Wompy. "You may think it is a chance in a million that a bottle dropped into the sea by Father MacBear somewhere very far away in the Northern Ocean should turn up exactly where he wished it would: in Bearloch. It is very remarkable, certainly. Mind-boggling even.

"But coincidences do happen more often than they should if the world were ruled by sheer chance. Sometimes tragic coincidences, but more often happy ones like this one.

"I call it serendipity. Serendipity is part of the way the world is. That's why it happens in so many of my stories.

"For example, a bear, a keen mountaineer, travels halfway across the world to climb Mount Everest. Who should he meet halfway up the mountain but his twin sister, whom he last saw ten years ago and thought was dead? She is fleeing from a horrible, ugly yeti who wants to force her to marry him. The yeti is a much better climber than she and just about to catch her. In the nick of time her mountaineering brother arrives on the scene, fights the yeti and saves his sister from a fate worse than death. Happens all the time."

It was very late on Midsummer Eve and Wompy was with the MacBear family in the parlour of the Den. They had gathered to read the message from Father MacBear. Grizzelda, of course, was with them, because the message was bound to be about her husband Grizzly as well as Father MacBear.

Mother MacBear had served scones with honey, and blackberry and cucumber tea. You would have thought she would have read the message in the bottle as soon as Tosh gave it to her, but Mother MacBear liked to do things properly. She wanted everyone concerned to hear what Father MacBear had to say to them all together, and she wanted them all to be sitting comfortably in the MacBears' cosy parlour where Father MacBear's favourite armchair had never been sat in by anyone since he left home. In fact the book he had been reading just before he went away was still resting on the arm of the chair. It was called: *The Mid-life Crisis: How to Enjoy it.*

Anticipation among the people gathered in the parlour had reached fever pitch by the time Mother MacBear at last sat down in her own armchair and started to open the roll of paper.

There were several sheets. She looked first at the end of the bottom sheet, where Father MacBear had signed his name Mungo MacBear, just to make certain it really was from him. After his name Father MacBear had written: Adventurer (also devoted husband and father).

The bears were on the edges of their chairs. Grizzelda was so anxious and excited she couldn't keep still. She kept passing the plate of scones around even though everyone still had uneaten ones. Tosh and Grampa both took advantage of this to eat several more scones than was good for them.

"This," said Mother MacBear at last, "is what he writes:

My dear and wondersome family:

You are always in my thoughts. As the old saying has it, "Absence makes a bear's heart wander."

You must have wondered why I left home without telling anyone I was going. It was on impulse. Grizzly had planned it, but only at the last minute I agreed to go with him.

I couldn't turn down the chance. You know I have always been an adventitious bear.

Mother MacBear stumbled over adventitious.

"I wish he wouldn't use these clever words," she said.

"And he usually gets them wrong," added Wompy.

Mother MacBear went on:

You know I have always been an adventitious bear. Adventures are what make life worth living. And here was a chance to go where no bear has gone before.

For Grizzly this voyage is an obsession. For years he has been unable to get out of his head the dream of finding the Island of the

Bishbirds. He kept it to himself, of course. Grizzly, as you know, is not a bear to broadcast his cherished thoughts.

Apparently he has an old picture of the Island of the Bishbirds hanging in his study at Blair Bear. I've never seen it. No one knows where it came from. It's probably just painted from someone's imagination. Who knows whether there really is an island of the bishbirds?

But Grizzly says the picture has power. It attracts. And over the years it has worked on him to the point where he could no longer resist. He had to go and look for the island.

Well, I expect you will remember the old saying I have often quoted: "Never follow a seal up a mountain." Sometimes I think that's what I've done. I wasn't bothered about the Island of the Bishbirds. It was the chance to explore the unknown that made me go with Grizzly. As I have often said, "Wherever a bear goes, a bear goes."

And it has been an expotition in more senses than one. Of course, we have no map. There is no map of the Northern Ocean beyond where the fisherfolk go for mackerel and sardines. So for much of the time we have allowed the boat to drift with the currents wherever they take us. It seems as good a plan as any.

How I miss you all! Grizzly, as you know, is a bear of few words. A reticent bear if ever there was one. He spends much of his time with his bumper book of absolutely fiendishly diabolical sudoku puzzles. The rest of the time he plays the pipes.

Now it's not that I don't like bagpipe music, but Grizzly only plays two tunes. One is *The Bonnie Bears of Bruin Braes*, which he plays when he's happy. When he feels sad, he plays *The Lost Wee Bearns of Bearloch*. I didn't know that one until I got stuck in a boat with Grizzly. Now I can't get it out of my head.

On the other hand, I have to admit that Grizzly's pipes have been our salvation. You see, there are monsters of the deep out here. Seriously weird creatures, even weirder than that stuffed nessie in Wompy's library. There are octopuses as big as the Den. But they're not really octopuses, because they have far more than eight tentacles. Twenty or more.

Fearsome is not the word. Hypertrepidatioussome, I'd say. Enough to turn a bear's bones to jelly.

And there are creatures you couldn't have imagined in your worst nightmares. Your brain would not have had room for them.

Any of them could have swallowed our little boat for a tasty wee snack between meals with no danger of spoiling its appetite for dinner.

But luckily Grizzly has his pipes. The music seems to enthrall them. They gather round the boat to listen. The multipuses turn upside down and wave all their tentacles in the air. The ginormous sea slugs do a sort of slithery dance in the slime they spread over the water. The lobster-like monsters with five huge eyes on sticks close them all and swoon.

It's hard on Grizzly. He has to go on playing for a long time until they are so tame and content that they'll swim happily away like any audience going home after a fabulous concert.

Sometimes we hear, drifting over the ocean from probably miles away, the sound of some creature with a voice as monstrous as its appearance trying to imitate the bagpipes. Probably there are now moaning monsters all over the Northern Ocean driving all other creatures crazy.

This amazing power of the bagpipes is just one of the flabbergasting wonders of our voyage.

"Well, that's the end of the first page," said Mother MacBear. "Would anyone like more blackberry and cucumber tea before I go on? Or would anyone prefer cocoa?"