

Chapter 1

Run for Your Life

A mid-summer evening seldom passes without an elder inviting the kits to his lodge for a story. Lazy yawns and heavy eye lids soon follow, but every now and then a story is so exciting, so captivating that sleep is not possible. This was one of those nights, it was a story about the Black Ghost.

Bump never tired of hearing frightening stories of encounters with the Black Ghost. The scarier the better and the more he heard the more determined he was to find this extraordinary creature. Few had ever seen the illusive beast up close. And, except for one, those who may have, never returned to tell the tale. His beautiful black coat naturally concealed him in the shadows of the forest while his piercing blue eyes defied the darkness of night; a perfect combination for the ambush of unwary prey. It was said, he was so powerful and ruthless that

even the mountain lion avoided him. And it was believed that his heart was made of stone, void of all mercy, kindness, or love; filled only with hate and a lust for blood. A wolf for sure, but unlike any other before him.

The elders had warned the kits to stay close to the water for the dark forest hides many dangers. To Bump, their words of warning seemed more like those of pirates trying to protect a hidden treasure. And on this evening, the story was so thrilling that it pushed him over the edge. His imagination went wild, like a roaring fire driven by powerful winds.

Bump wouldn't or couldn't wait another day. Bound and determined to discover the secret lair of the Black Ghost, that night he hastily devised a sketchy plan. Willow was the only one he would trust with the details and he planned to take her with him on this dangerous journey.

Bump and Willow were kits. Were they Labrador retrievers instead of beavers, people would say they were full-

grown but still puppies at heart. Old enough to care for themselves, exploding with unlimited energy, but lacking in cautious restraint and good judgement. They were only three years old in people years; that's twelve or thirteen in beaver years.

Willow was as graceful as a female deer. When she spoke, Bump's heart was aflutter. He thought she sounded like an angel; her voice as soft and gentle as a light breeze blowing through the trees. Bump on the other hand, could be heard coming from one end of the pond to the other. Everyone considered him to be quite obnoxious and he was usually in more trouble than all his brothers, sisters, and cousins lumped together. Yet, Willow was somehow able to see through it all. Underneath Bump's boastings, wild imaginations and impulsive quest for adventure beat the kind and gentle heart of her best friend.

His real name wasn't Bump, of course. Willow lovingly called him that because he was so preoccupied with thoughts of daring conquests that he seldom paid attention to where he was walking. Well, the nickname stuck, and it wasn't long before everyone called him Bump.

"Willow, this is what we'll do," said Bump. "We'll sneak away just before daylight. Then stay in the shadows of the rocks and trees where we won't be seen. Most important, we'll be very quiet. Everyone knows the Black Ghost prowls at night, so by morning he'll be sound asleep. He won't even know we're there," he assured Willow.

Early the next morning, Bump and Willow slipped away before the other beavers awoke. Bump was right about one thing, their dark fur coats made them seem to disappear as they moved through the shadowy forest. Willow tried to walk without breaking the smallest twig or rustling a single leaf.

“Bump,” Willow said, “I thought we were supposed to be quiet.”

“We are.”

“Well, at least one of us is,” she whispered. “You’re making more noise than a bull moose galloping through the forest. We’re getting a long way from the pond... Maybe we should turn back.”

“It’s okay, don’t be scared Willow, I’ll protect you. Come on, just a little further.”

Far too far from the safety of the colony they stopped and hid behind a downed moss-covered pine tree at the edge of a meadow. They huddled there for a few moments staring at each other. Willow gripped bump’s paw and held on tight. Then, in perfect unison, they took a deep breath, braced themselves on their webbed feet with their broad tails, and slowly raised their heads, just high enough to peer over the top. The meadow was inviting, it looked like the perfect playground

for a kit, covered by a carpet of wispy green grass and arrayed with brightly colored spring flowers. Both instinctively knew that playground was reserved for the fast of foot. If threatened, deer and elk could sprint for the forest, but a slow-moving beaver wouldn’t stand a chance. Across the meadow, just beyond the tree line was a granite cliff with a waterfall cascading down into a billowing mist at the bottom. Bump was fixated on that cliff.

“Willow, can you see that?” Bump whispered.

“See what?”

“There’s a cave near that waterfall. Can’t you see it? I’ll bet it’s the den of the Black Ghost.”

“It’s just a shadow Bump. We need to go back,” she said, tugging at his leg.

Bump wasn’t listening, “Come on,” he instructed, leading Willow around the edges of the meadow closer to what he was sure was a cave.

Willow finally had enough of this foolishness, she stopped. “Bump, I’m not taking another step. Let’s go home.”

“Okay, we will, but wait here for a few minutes. I’ll be right back, I promise. You’ll be safe here.”

Willow reluctantly released her death grip from Bump’s paw. Bump moved forward alone, seemingly unaware that he had placed them both in grave danger. His imagination had escaped the boundaries of any common sense, wild with heroic thoughts of finding the secret lair. This time he walked quietly, at a turtle’s pace, careful to place each paw in a spot that would avoid snapping the smallest twig. He inched his way around the edge of the meadow until he was close enough to see. There it was, a cave, hidden beneath a huge boulder. The trail leading to the entrance was worn, rutted and dusty, without grass or weeds. No doubt, something called this home. Any predator living in this cave had a clear view of the entire valley and the animals that grazed in the meadow. *This must be the lair of the Black Ghost*, he thought.

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