

BIGFOOT MOUNTAIN

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MINNIE

Chapter One

High, high, high up in a pine tree, where the slopes of a mountain meet the shoreline of a bay, sat Minnie. She sat on her branch hugging the slender top of the trunk as the wind gently swayed her tree back and forth. She loved the scent from the pine needles and the thin dribbles of sap that wept from the tree and made her hands sticky as she climbed, and she loved meeting the ants and centipedes and spiders and all the other bugs that lived in its lumpy, scaly bark. A fly landed on her freckly nose. She waved it away.

Minnie twisted on her perch and, shading her eyes from the sun, peered up at the forested mountain and the pale grey cloud of smoke that filled half the blue sky behind it.

On the far side of the water a dark glowering cloud loomed over the tree-covered hills. There

was a sudden *flash* followed a second later by a loud *crack!* She watched as a jagged three-pronged fork flashed to the ground, striking the highest point of the long green hilly island that lay close to the opposite shore. A second later there came a deep grumbling roll of thunder.

She noticed a distant silhouette of a bird wheeling and arching high above. The bird turned towards Minnie gliding on the warm air. It was a golden eagle. As it flew overhead, she could see splashes of white on the under side of its wings, the black and white fanned tail, and the bright yellow talons that looked ever ready to grasp a fish straight out of the water or to snatch a weasel from the long grass.

Minnie stared at the mass of dense green trees on the far island, wondering if there would be a burst of flames, wondering what lightning did when it hit. She imagined a tree exploding in bits in a flash and all the animals that lived in or near it running or flying away in a desperate panic. Nature could be cruel, she thought, and she looked down at her home, her little cabin in the clearing by the bay, surrounded by many, many square miles of nothing but water, trees and more trees.

There were six cabins dotted among the pine trees on the cleared land between the grassy track and the shore, plus one more up the track near the forest. Minnie and Dan's cabin was nestled in tight between a rocky outcrop and the vegetable garden, which had a high fence all round it to keep deer and other wild animals out. It overlooked their five cabins, which were all built raised up on stout posts, high enough for storage space under them, with wooden steps up to a wide deck.

Her stepfather, Dan, was coming down the steps of their cabin carrying a can of paint and a ladder. From up in her tree Dan looked very tiny as he walked across the grass from their cabin to the next one. Minnie reckoned if she was standing on the ground looking down at a daisy, with its white petals and yellow centre, that's about how big Dan looked now.

Up above the world Minnie felt calm, and connected to something big and important. She didn't know what that was exactly, but guessed it was nature as she was in a tree rooted to the earth and through the tree she was connected to the whole world. And though her mom had gone, Minnie felt less alone when she was hugging her tree.

Minnie climbed down from the pine, and as she did so some of her hair snagged on the lowest branch. ‘Ow! Darn hair!’ Her light brown hair was a mass of curls so unruly that it was impossible to play hide-and-go-seek outside in the bushes behind the cabins unless she was wearing a beanie hat pulled down low, or she would quickly get entangled and have to yell for her friend Billy to come and release her, and that would defeat the purpose of the game as Billy was the only other person playing with her. One time her hair got so caught up Billy had to go get her mother who had to cut her free with a pair of scissors. It was annoying.

The grass between the cabins was short and neat and the scent of its freshly mown greenness lifted her spirits. Minnie kicked off her shoes so she could enjoy the warmth and softness of the grass on her feet and strolled over to Dan.

‘Where’ve you been?’ Dan asked, ‘I saw the school bus twenty minutes ago.’

‘Nowhere. What ya doin?’ Dan didn’t answer so Minnie said, ‘I was up a tall tree watching the

lightning strike the island. Lightning, Dan! And wondering whether it was going to strike me next.' Still nothing from Dan. 'It did not, you'll be pleased to hear. What ya doin'?'

'How was school?' he asked.

'Fine. What ya doin'?'

'What does it look like I'm doing?'

Minnie answered, 'Painting the cabins the same boring colour they've always been. White!'

'Good enough for your mom for ten years, good enough for me.'

'What's wrong with yellow? Or blue? How about a different colour for each cabin? Then you could say to the guests "Oh good afternoon Lord and Lady Snuffington, you are in the yellow cabin, down there". "Oh," she'll say, "thank you kind sir, but how will I find it, as I'm rather dim and I have people to help me in the big city?" And you'll say, "It's yellow! Right next to the blue one!" Yes, it's a brilliant idea, I agree Dan, we could have yellow, purple, blue, green and...'

Dan put down the tin of white paint, scratched his black and silver beard, and looked at her while she thought.

'And pink!'

‘Best to leave well enough alone.’ This was a typical Dan response to Minnie trying to cheer him up with her particular brand of creative humour.

‘Look Dan! A plane. You love planes.’ A white plane with big black propellers flew low over the water on the far side of the bay and looked like it was going to land on the water but instead skimmed over the surface sending up a white plume of spray from its belly and took off again. ‘What’s it doin’?’ asked Minnie.

‘Taking on water. That’s the Bombadier 415, also known as the Super Scooper. It can take on 6,000 litres of water in twelve seconds, and...’

They watched the plane lift and soar high in the sky, turning toward the mountain. ‘...and then it’s gonna dump that water on the fire.’

‘Fascinating Dan, but I thought you said the fire was out now.’

‘It is. I think. They’ve been using helicopters to dump water. I guess the plane was busy elsewhere.’ Dan looked up at the mountain behind the cabins. ‘We could do with rain. I heard thunder.’

‘That was on the other side of the bay,’ said Minnie pointing at the island. ‘So, Dan why do

they need the plane to drop water if it's gonna rain?'

'That rain might just blow north and miss us.'

Minnie looked to the thunderclouds and then back to the plane, which was now about the same size in the sky as the eagle was when it flew over.

'If the fire's out, why are the cabins still empty?'

'Fire danger. State told us to cancel all bookings. That was when the fire was spreading. Besides no one wants to come when there's wild fires.'

'So, are we screwed?'

'*Screwed?* That is not appropriate language for a twelve year old to be using.'

'Oh. Ok,' said Minnie, 'but *are* we?'

'No, business is fine.' He picked up the paint can, 'Well, it'll pick up.' And he walked off towards the next empty cabin.

Chapter Two

Inside their cabin, the cabin where she had been born and where her mother had died, Minnie stood in the kitchen drinking a glass of water. Since her mother had passed, the weekends were long and uneventful. She had books and she had the internet but she always loved exploring with her mom best of all. When the sea was calm, they'd go canoeing together, along the shore exploring the dozens of small islands. Some were big enough to build a cabin on, and some had just one or two low bent trees growing on them.

Using their paddles they'd scoop up the dark red spiny sea urchins from the shallows, some the size of a soccer ball. To Minnie they looked despairing and lost just waving their long thin scarlet spikes around helplessly. She would drop them back in the water, in the deep rock pools.

Sometimes they'd trail a line behind the canoe and catch fish – pink salmon, or grey trout. They would take them home and cook them in hot

butter. The three of them would eat at the small wooden table by the fire, and her mom would always say, without fail, 'Mmm, them's good eats!' They pulled the flesh from the bones and wolfed it down with chunks of the soft brown bread her mom would bake.

Minnie palmed tears from her cheeks and opened the door to her mom's room. She looked in the wardrobe and the scent from her mother's clothes enveloped her. How long would her clothes retain that smell? It was a combination of her mom's fancy French scent, which she insisted was called 'Optimist' but the bottle said something else, and of wool from her sweaters, and leather from her belts and boots. Dan hadn't moved her clothes or put any of her things in storage. It was exactly how her mom had left it when she went to the hospital.

When she came home from the hospital, because she insisted on being in the place she loved most for her final days, she hadn't the strength to open the wardrobe and she was done with clothes anyway. She'd said, 'I'm done with everything except love. Love for you, Minnie, and love for Dan. Love for my friends and love for this place. I need nothing else but love to send me on my way.'

Minnie decided to go and find Billy and Musto, because they were always 'up' and never 'down'. Billy and Minnie had something in common as, like her, he had just one grown up looking after him, because his dad was always away driving trucks.

Instead of climbing out of the small bathroom window at the back of the cabin, which she usually did to save time, or going in to the vegetable garden and climbing over the fence, she took the longer way round. She walked past her favourite tree, through the grassy car-parking area, and up the track. It led her past the solar panels Dan had installed on the rise behind their cabin and past the wind turbine up on the little rocky outcrop close to the forest edge. Sitting on top of a tall metal post, supported by cables pegged to the ground, were four slim white blades, like an aeroplane's propeller, which turned steadily in a breeze generating electricity for the cabins.

Billy and his mom, Connie, lived in the seventh cabin, on a small parcel of land up the track a ways, close to the forest, and as it was higher up the slope it had a clear view over the cabins and across the bay. Connie had bought the land from Minnie's

mother, and the two women had built the cabin together. It was long and low, with flowering white honeysuckle curling and coiling in and along the wooden rails that bordered the front of the deck. Dan was hammering something somewhere as Minnie climbed the steps. She could see him on the roof of one of the cabins from this high point. Behind him stretched the blue-grey expanse of the bay framed by tall dark pines on both sides of the cabin clearing.

A shaggy-coated yellow-tan dog lay on the deck and he lifted his head and wagged his tail, which thwacked on the wooden boards.

‘Hey Musto,’ she knelt, patting and stroking the dog. She yelled out, ‘Billy-Bug!’

Minnie sometimes called him Billy-Bug because when her mother first saw the very tiny baby Billy wrapped up tightly in a blanket, she said, ‘Oh don’t he just look as snug as a bug in rug!’ And he did. Her mom had called him that ever since.

The screen door was flung open by Connie. ‘Hi Minnie. How are you doing?’ She held a large wooden bowl of long, gnarly green beans.

‘Hi Connie, I’m fine. Can Billy come play?’

A single bolt of silver ran through her long

black-braided hair, fastened with a brown leather lace and with feathers pushed in to the knot. She was bare-footed, wearing a long, loose-fitting sky blue cotton frock. She put the bowl on the table.

‘Let me give you a big hug.’ She wrapped up Minnie in her arms and squeezed her tight.

‘Stop it! Connie stop it!’

‘Oh Minnie. Look at you. Growing so fast in to a fine-looking young lady!’ Minnie wriggled free of Connie’s arms.

‘We saw each other yesterday, Connie!’

Billy appeared at the door grinning cheerfully. He was ten and small for his age, with an unruly mop of straw-blond hair.

‘I know but I just, I just...’ Connie’s hazel eyes welled up and she said, ‘I just, I feel for you so, for you both. How’s Dan today?’

‘Hard to know.’

‘Uh huh. Strong silent type,’ said Connie.

‘Silent? He’s perfected silence,’ said Minnie, still petting Musto, ‘except when he’s hammering. He does a lot of hammering.’

They all three looked over at Dan, crouched over, hammering on a cabin roof.

‘Well,’ said Connie, ‘good news about the fire

being out. Most folk here rely on summer takings to see 'em through winter.'

'Sure, yup, I know,' said Minnie, lifting Musto's large floppy ears up so the dog looked alert yet foolish.

'Your mom loved this place so much Minnie. Well, we all do. How could we not?'

'Because there's no ice-cream parlour?' said Billy, making Minnie laugh.

'She'd walk in the woods for hours,' said Connie.

'Would she?' asked Minnie.

'Sure, while you were at school. Where d'you think she foraged all those mushrooms and shoots and herbs?'

'Huh,' said Minnie, 'Right.'

Connie started shucking the bowl of greens by twisting the pods so they split, then running a thumb up inside to dislodge the purple beans sitting there in a neat row. Minnie was mesmerised by this speed-shucking. Connie was so quick at it she barely looked at the beans as she worked and talked.

'Can be mighty lonely when there's no guests here though. Like in wintertime. I'm beginning to dread the winters, Minnie, I don't mind telling you. But my, this is such a beautiful place. I will never

tire of that view. Never.' For maybe the millionth time in their lives the three of them turned to look out at the bay dotted with forested islands, carved apart by narrow channels and tidal passages.

'What's the big island called? Does it have a name, Connie?' asked Minnie.

'Um, let me think now. Echo. Echo Island,' said Connie. 'Looks like rain over there, but it might pass northerly.'

'I like the winter,' said Minnie. 'I like the snow. Without the winter we wouldn't love the spring so much.'

Billy leapt off the deck, tumbling into a forward roll and stopping in a kneeling position, holding his stick like a rifle.

'Let's go fishin!'' yelled Billy, and he charged off down the track. Musto bounded off the deck after Billy.

Minnie ran after them as Connie hollered, 'Be careful!'

Minnie grabbed Billy's arm. 'Billy-Bug.'

'What?'

'Let's go up.'

'Up what? Up where? What do you mean? Up? No.'

‘Billy, look at me,’ she said. ‘What is your role in life?’

‘Huh?’ he asked.

‘What do you see as your role in life, what’s your main job, what do we expect of you?’

Billy looked up and around, genuinely perplexed by the question his friend was posing.

‘OK... It is...’ he began, ‘it is to make you laugh as much as I can.’

‘Thanks, but what else?’ asked Minnie.

‘To keep Mom safe,’ he answered.

‘What else?’

With a rising inflection he asked, ‘Is it ... to do as I’m *told*?’

‘Correct!’ Minnie pointed up at the forest. ‘I wanna see the smoke! Up close.’

‘Are you *crazy*? That’s like a fifty-mile hike! Besides the fire’s out.’

‘I know the fire’s out, but there’s still smoke. I can see it from my tree. Dan says it’s two miles to the top if you take the trails. So, gotta be less if you head straight up.’

Billy pondered this logic. ‘Less if you head straight up...’ He scratched his blond head, ‘OK.’

‘Good! You and me, up there! I have water.’ She

hoisted her small red backpack onto her thin shoulders.

‘Smoke!’ Billy yelled, running straight up the trail towards the towering redwoods, pines and firs.

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