

BIGFOOT MOUNTAIN

RODERICK O'GRADY



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 hair was a mass of light brown 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 since Billy was the only other person playing with her. One time her hair got so caught up that Billy had to go get her mother 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’d 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’d 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. It 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 before taking 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.

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