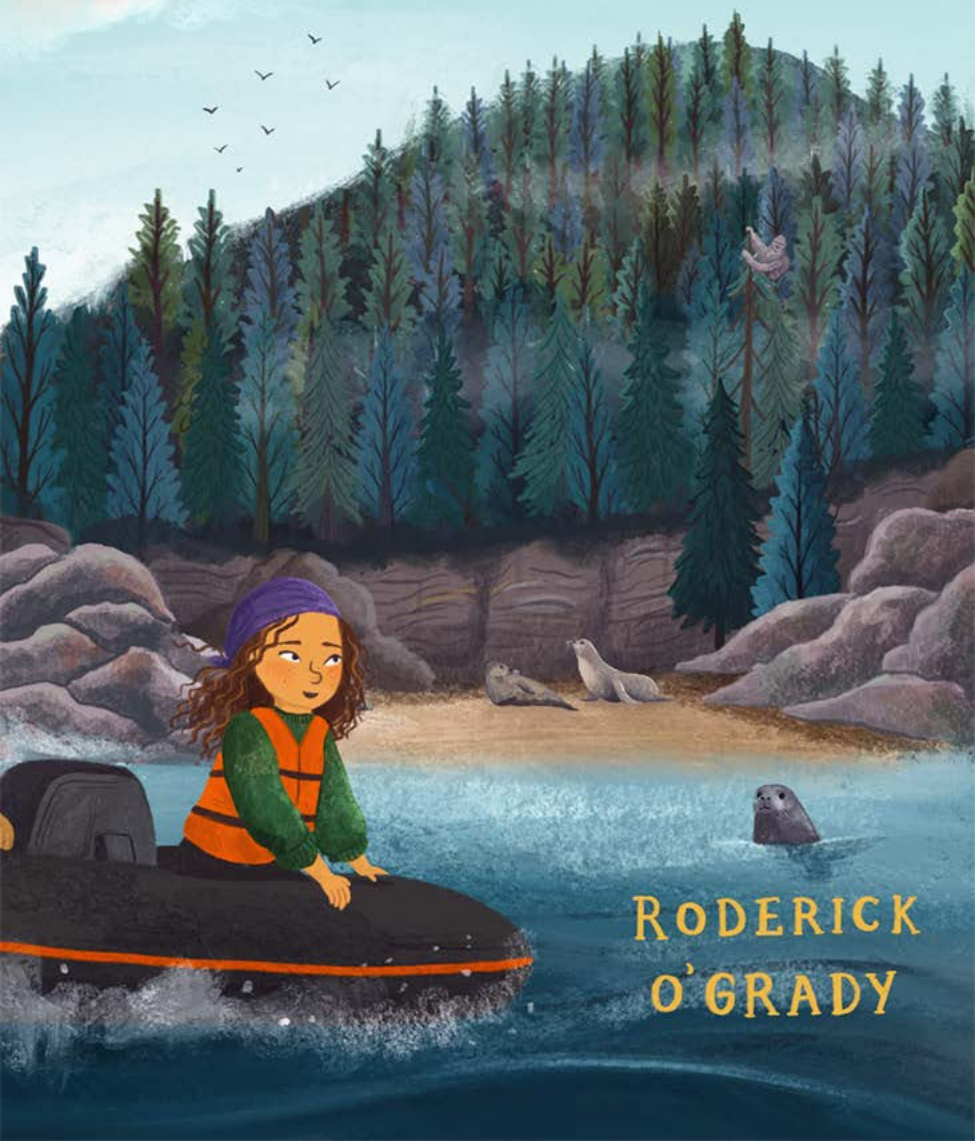


# BIGFOOT

## ISLAND



RODERICK  
O'GRADY

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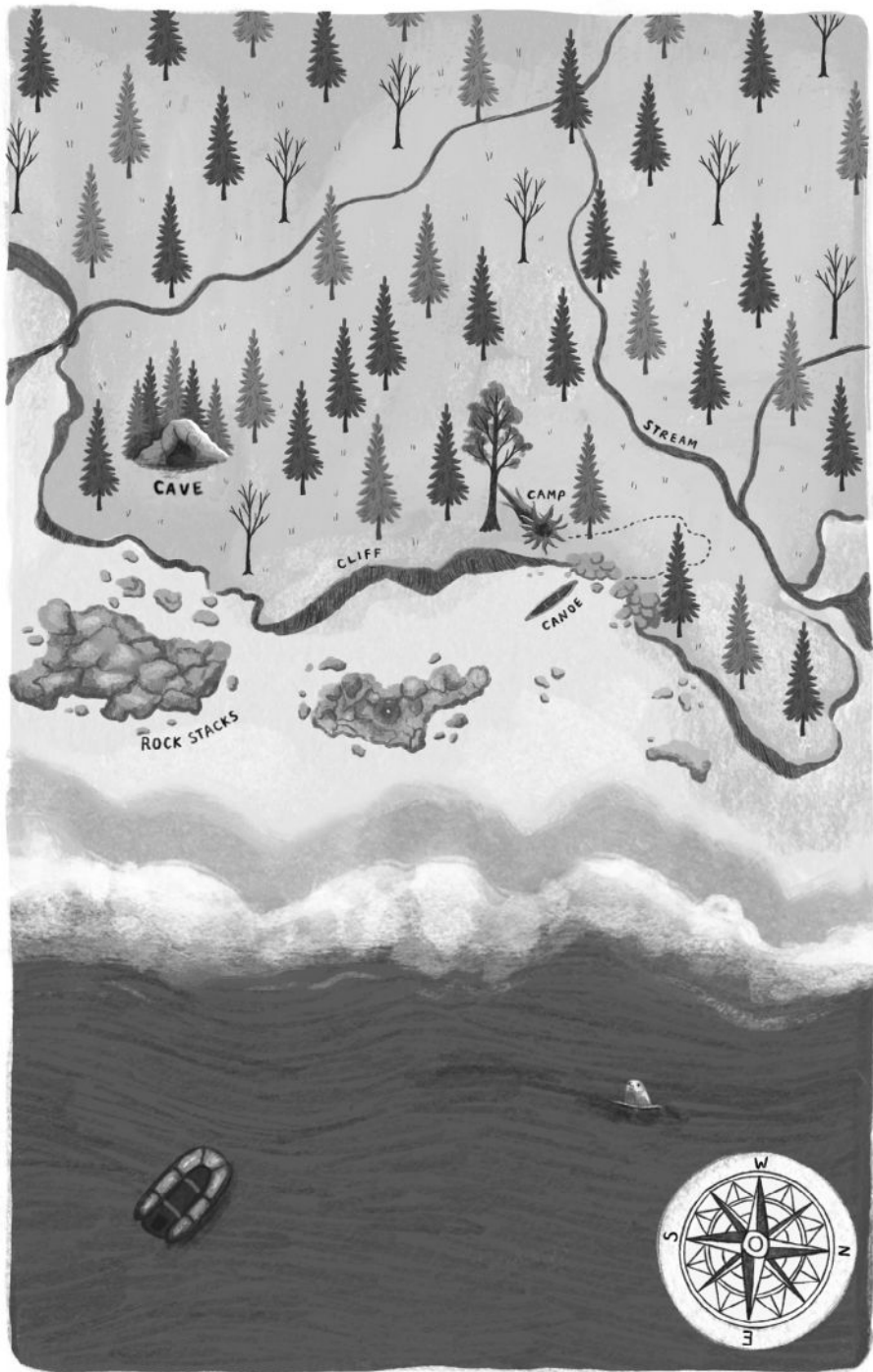
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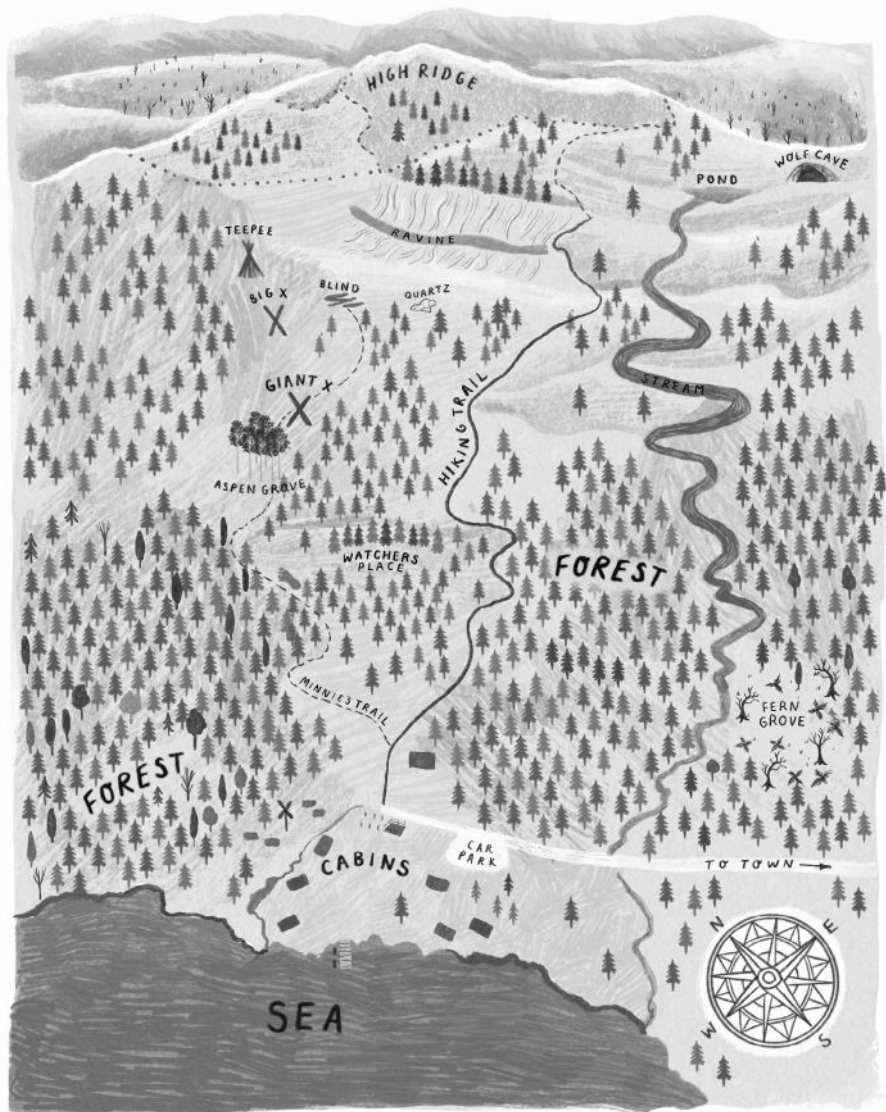
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To my children Oona and Gus, who scampered  
with me through the forest



# BIGFOOT MOUNTAIN





# MINNIE

## Chapter One

With her feet together, both Minnie's trainers nearly fitted inside the footprint.

The indentations left by the Bigfoot had been stepped on so many times by the small pointed hooves of passing deer that it was barely discernible. Pine needles had filled the dips and dents in the mud, and rain had dripped on the footprints, softening the edges. Minnie lifted a small pine branch that had dropped from above or been knocked off by a passing creature. Using it as a brush, she swept away the leaf litter to reveal a second huge footprint.

Next to her, in a patch of brilliant sunshine, Musto stretched out his shaggy yellow front legs and settled onto his side, his back against a stand of ferns. He wagged his tail on the earth of the game trail. Minnie bent to ruffle his neck fur and



to stroke his head, fondling his floppy ears, then stood and stepped the longest step her legs would allow her. It reached nowhere close to the third footprint. Further along the trail, in the fourth print, she noticed where the little toe had been splayed out slightly when the foot had slipped on the earth. It had been dry when she and Billy had found the footprints a few weeks ago, and the trail was well used by deer and other forest creatures so the ground had been quite bare, exposing the soil beneath the grass and ferns. It had been so unusually dry at that time that there had been fires on the mountain ranges in the east – terrible fires that had ravaged many miles of tinder-dry forest. Now the ground was damp as the usual summer rains had returned. Trees dripped and tiny jewels of moisture clung to silk strands slung across the trail by busy spiders.

Minnie surveyed the forest carefully, peering up the trail at the dark spaces between the cedar trees, the firs, pines and scrubby bushes. Birds were singing, whistling and peeping; bugs were humming. Wind swayed strands of pale lichen from low limbs and shifted the higher branches, rattling them gently above her. Serenity, and a

sense of connection to the land, the trees, and all the roaming creatures who made the mountain slopes their home, came welling up, and she filled her lungs, flung wide her arms and yelled as loudly as she could, *'Hellooo...!'*

She wasn't really expecting a reply but she did strain her ears in case, somewhere on the upper slopes, the maker of the footprints had heard her, taken up a stout stick and swung it hard against a tree trunk. But there was no answering knock, no long whooping call.

Turning to retreat down the game trail, something caught her eye. Beyond the fourth footprint, where the trail rose slightly before dipping through a ferny hollow, was a small pile of pinecones.

'What's this?'

Musto padded to her side. Three pinecones had been placed close together with a fourth sitting on top. Musto sniffed them, took a step back and looked up into the forest. The rich deep-brown scales were closed tight, and as Minnie lifted the top cone it felt damp to the touch. She gazed at it like she'd never seen a pinecone before.

Smiling, she pressed her freckly nose to it.

‘Hmm ... piney.’ She looked up into the shadows of the forest. ‘Thank you!’

The young girl and the yellow dog ran back down the trail through the spruce, pines and cottonwood trees.



Minnie sat high up in her favourite pine tree, hugging the slender trunk as it swayed gently in the summer breeze. From her lofty perch she had a fine view of the surrounding land and sea: their five small cabins on the grassy slope down to the bay, each with a perfect view of the water, today flat and calm like stretched grey silk; the small tree-tufted inshore islands; and the larger island lying across the bay like a reclining giant under an emerald-green blanket.

Directly below her tree, on one side, was the fenced-in square of vegetable garden, close to the eight tall foundation posts on which their old cabin used to sit – the cabin they’d demolished so the mountain’s Bigfoot clan could use their ancient route to the sea. On the other side of her tree was the dusty space where her stepfather,

Dan, and their neighbour, Connie, parked their trucks. If she twisted on her branch Minnie could see the track she'd just walked down, past Connie's cabin, the deck adorned in garlands of white honeysuckle, where Connie lived with Billy, who was a couple of years younger than Minnie, and Musto the dog. Behind their cabin stretched the steep forested slopes and deep, dark ravines of Bigfoot Mountain.

Minnie and Dan were living in one of the smaller cabins while he built them a new and improved home. Their new cabin's first level, set on stout posts, was nearly complete, with a wide deck wrapping round it on three sides. It was to be bigger than the old cabin, and positioned close to the rocky outcrop on which sat the black solar panels and the spinning white wind turbine.

Bags of tools and coils of power cables sat on plywood panels that were neatly stacked on the grass. Dan was re-using the lumber from the deconstructed cabin, but there had been a delivery this morning from town, and Minnie could see him carrying pale brown planks of freshly sawn wood up the steps to the deck.

Minnie's curly brown hair was tied back in an

optimistic attempt to prevent it snagging on twigs as she climbed. Multiple coils of her hair were hooked on bits of rough bark or hanging in tendrils from twigs. She'd climb up the tree at least once a day. It was her special place to sit, remember her mom, and just *be*.

As she sat on her perch, a foot securely tucked under a lower branch, something caught her eye near the big island on the far side of the bay – something that hadn't been there yesterday.

A bee buzzed around her head, hovered by her yellow T-shirt and landed on her white shorts. She ignored it, fully engrossed in what she could see emerging from the haze where the large green island's stretch of shore met the sea. Lifting her binoculars to her freckled face and squinting, she peered at the tiny white object glinting in the low morning sunshine.

Known locally as Echo Island and thought to be uninhabited, Minnie knew that it *was* in fact inhabited, but not by humans.

Minnie now thought of it as Bigfoot Island.

The water of the bay that separated the coastline from Bigfoot Island was slightly choppy on the far side and the grey water was sprinkled

with white plumes. On Minnie's short stretch of shoreline at Cabin Cove the surface was calmer, the incoming breeze buffered by the pines, the stunted sea-oaks and the spiky broom bushes on the cluster of small outlying islands.

'What do we have here, bee?' she murmured.

The bee buzzed off towards the mountain, perhaps to feed at Connie's blooming honeysuckle.

'Oh, no. No, no. Not good.'

Minnie lowered the binoculars and looked down.

'Hey!' she yelled. 'Dad!'

Dan looked up from where he was working on the cabin deck.

'Look!' Minnie pointed out across the water. Dan shielded his eyes from the sun and peered at the white boat heading towards them.

It took a few minutes for Minnie to climb down her tree and, sprinting across the mown grass, she joined him, breathless, on the deck of their temporary home.

Dan was looking through his 'binos' at the advancing boat.

'Recognise it?'

'No, I don't.'

It had been two weeks since they had stood on this deck and watched in stunned silence as an entire clan of ten Bigfoots had sneaked through the property from tree to tree, bush to bush, shadow to shadow, before running and jumping from the end of the jetty, plunging into the icy cold sea and swimming westward towards Bigfoot Island. It was an event that was so earth-shatteringly unusual that it had profoundly affected all four humans who had witnessed it. The effect it had had on the intrepid Musto was an enduring mystery.

Fishing boats would pass by out in the bay most days and their lights could be seen at night, but now a large boat they did not know was heading straight towards them from the island, and it was not a fishing boat.

‘Small passenger vessel ... custom pilothouse ... hard to see at this angle, straight on. Maybe as much as forty or fifty footer! Nice!’

Minnie jabbed Dan in the ribs gently with her elbow. ‘It’s not nice, it’s awful! We do not need a boatload of tourists cluttering up the place.’

‘Yes, we do. Maybe they’ll want to stay a few nights.’

‘Then they should have booked online, like everyone else.’

‘There is nobody else, Min. We need the business. Coastal Fire Centre gave us the all-clear days ago, you know that. We’re open.’

The smoke clouds from the enormous weeks-long wildfires, the result of a freakishly hot summer, were gone at last. As she stared at the distant mountain top, crowned with a flat ridge of dark green, she whispered softly, ‘Stay up there. Stay up there.’

Minnie trotted down the steps. ‘I’m going to consult Billy.’

She headed back up the slope towards the track. Stopping near the half-built new cabin, she glanced back at the white boat still less than halfway across the sound. Holding out a straight arm with her thumb up, she squinted and estimated the boat size was still less than the size of her thumbnail.

‘Reckon about ... twenty minutes.’

She walked by the fenced-in vegetable garden in which she had spent pretty much all of the last two weeks digging, weeding and tidying. Working alone there had helped the events of that



momentous night to settle, though the images were still vivid and played often in her mind.

She could easily recall the massive black head of the young Bigfoot rising up from below the far end of the deck, next to the seemingly lifeless body of a crow they'd just noticed there, lying on its back. When the Bigfoot had placed a huge hand gently over the bird, it had stirred, kicking its spindly black legs, flapped its wings, and flown away. The amazement and wonder that she, Dan, Connie and Billy had experienced was overwhelming, but had been accompanied by a strange and profound sense of calm.

She hurried through the flattened patch of bare earth where the eight posts stuck out of the ground, each much taller than Minnie, and up the grassy track. Connie and Billy were Minnie's only neighbours for many miles, so if she wanted a chat, they were the only option. Connie's cabin, close to the forest, was easily the prettiest – the wooden rail of the long, wide deck smothered in twisting green climbers, the sweet aroma from white flowers attracting a constant humming mass of butterflies, wasps, moths and, of course, bees.

Minnie smiled at the busy insects. ‘Oh hi, bees and wasps and butterflies, and ... hey, Billy! Billy-Bug!’

First out of the screen door was Musto, grinning goofily, swiping his shaggy yellow tail with delight as he bounded over to Minnie, who stood on the top step, one hand resting on a deck post and the other on her hip. The dog tossed his head begging for a caress. She knelt and fussed over him.

Connie emerged from the cabin with a green apple in her hand. ‘Hi Minnie.’

She wore a long, loose dress with a scattering of small blue flowers across it and her feet were bare. Her thick black hair with its one streak of grey was pulled back off her face and tied with a turquoise-coloured beaded band.

‘Hi Connie.’

Billy burst from the cabin, all shaggy blond hair, long, skinny arms, baggy shorts and bare feet.

Minnie stood up, one hand on the post the other on her hip.

‘Hey Bill.’

‘Hey.’

‘Yeah, hi.’

‘Yeah, hi.’

‘What’s up, Billy?’

‘Not much. Why are you standing like that?’

‘This is how brave adventurers stand when they have important news to share.’

‘What news?’ asked Billy.

‘The Bigfoots are coming back.’

‘Wait! What? Where? Whaddya mean?’

Connie pointed down the slope. ‘What’s Dan doing?’

Dan was still on the deck of the cabin peering through his binoculars. From this higher vantage point there was a clear view of the cabins and beyond them the small islands, the wide empty mass of seawater and, ploughing across towards them, the white boat.

‘Dan is looking at the boat the Bigfoots are on.’

Connie and Billy were used to Minnie’s particular brand of humour, but Billy rated his friend as super-smart, as brave as a lion, and someone around whom interesting things happened. So he looked closely at Minnie, who kept a straight face, until she cracked, announcing, ‘Ha! Gotcha Billy-Boy!’

‘You did not get me: Bigfoots on a boat!’

Connie shaded her eyes. ‘That’s not a fishing boat.’

‘Yeah, bad news! We have visitors.’

‘Want to go up in the forest, Billy-Bug? Musto could use another stretch of the old legs, huh, Musto?’

‘No thanks.’

‘The Bigfoots are gone, Billy. They’re over on Bigfoot Island. We saw them go.’

‘Yeah, I know. I remember it well.’

‘Don’t you want to see who’s on that boat?’ asked Connie taking a bite out of the apple. ‘It’s heading this-a-way.’

Minnie was looking up at the mountain. ‘Not particularly.’

Connie crossed the deck to where Minnie knelt stroking Musto’s head. She handed her the apple. ‘Not ready to share this place, Min?’

Her thick black braid hung over her shoulder, and she tickled Minnie’s nose with the end of it. Minnie grinned.

Connie stood up. ‘Let’s go check out this boatload of Bigfoots.’

Minnie moved to sit on the steps, munching on the apple. ‘I’ll catch up with you.’

She was hungry. Dan’s lunch times were erratic, so she usually just helped herself when

hunger pangs struck. She passed the apple to Billy who took a big bite, handed it back and launched himself off the steps, rolling on the grass on landing, and running down the path after his mother and Musto.

Minnie ate the apple to the core and, hurling it high into the trees across the track, announced, 'Free lunch, bugs!'

She stepped on to the trail and stood facing the forest. 'Do not come down here, mister! Nothing to see here!' Then she gazed into the distance at the advancing boat and at Dan, Connie and Billy walking down to meet it.

She had held on to her extraordinary secret for two weeks, since the night the Bigfoots left, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep it to herself.



Billy looked perplexed. 'Why doesn't it come in closer?'

Minnie, Dan, Connie and Billy stood on the floating jetty where their two small rowboats were moored, one painted blue, and one painted green.

The big white boat was resting at anchor out in the deeper water.

Dan raised the binoculars to his eyes.

‘Tide will be turning soon, and it won’t be deep enough for that vessel to moor up any closer.’

They watched its black inflatable dinghy being lifted off the roof of the cabins and winched out over the side to be lowered on to the water.

‘How many people have you seen on board, Dan?’

‘Not many, Connie.’ He lowered his binos. ‘Maybe four. Looks like a couple and their son and the skipper of the boat. That’s it.’

The dinghy was pulled round to the stern of the boat, where a safety rail was swung open like a gate. Now the couple and a tall, slim boy stepped down off the platform at the back and sat in the inflatable. The older man with the rope stepped confidently into the dinghy and pushed off from the vessel. He pulled on the starter rope and the motor roared, spluttering in the water, briefly spewing a cloud of blue-grey smoke.

Dan turned to the others. ‘OK, at the risk of stating the obvious, no one mentions the ‘B’ word. Got it?’



The smiling skipper lobbed a rope up onto the jetty. 'Permission to come ashore?'

Minnie grabbed it up and whipped it round a post, cinching it tight. She was watching the visitors closely and Connie placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

'Sure. Welcome,' said Dan, as the slim teenager stepped ashore.

The skipper was holding the jetty side with his hand, as he stood bent over in the dinghy. 'I'm Sam Tooke. That's my boat out there, the *Squamish Queen*.'

Minnie noted his grey hair and beard and reckoned he was pretty old. He reached up and shook Connie's hand. On his right forearm was a tattoo of a stylized eagle head in profile.

'Hi Sam, I'm Dan. This is my neighbour, Connie, and our kids, Minnie and Billy.'

Sam looked bemused.

The other man stepped on to the jetty, 'Hi. Friendly neighbours, huh? I like this place already. I'm Alex.'

He was younger than Sam, but Minnie reckoned

he was older than Dan, because he had grey sideburns and the stubble on his chin was white, whereas Dan's beard was mostly still black.

'Oh, no, I mean, we're not...' Dan began. 'Connie is Billy's mom and I am Minnie's dad. They live in the cabin up the track. This is, well, these are our cabins: mine and Minnie's, Minnie's and mine. Minnie and I own these cabins.'

Minnie patted his arm. 'I think they've got it.'

'OK... Well, I'm Alex Ashton-Kitto, this is my wife Cristy, and that's our boy Marshal. Good to meet you.'

Minnie looked at the teenager. He had straight brown hair with a fringe that covered his eyes. He wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt buttoned at the wrists, even though it was a hot day and everyone else except Connie was wearing shorts.

'Beautiful spot you have here,' said Alex.

'Stunning,' agreed Cristy.

Sam had climbed out of the dinghy and was tying a second rope to a post.

'Thanks,' said Dan.

Cristy admired the cabins, the pines, the grassy slope up to the forest. 'Just lovely,' she said.



And blessed shade from these pine trees. It's heavenly.'

She took off her wide-brimmed hat and long blonde locks cascaded to her shoulders.

'Nothing much happens here,' said Minnie, noticing the way the sun lit Cristy's hair so it seemed to gleam, like Musto's yellow fur after he'd been bathed. 'But the forest ... well, the forest is crawling with dangerous animals – like bears, mountain lions, rabid moose...'

'Really?' asked Billy. 'I thought...'

'Minnie, please! Stop that.' Dan held her arm.

'Do not go into the forest!' Minnie said, twisting away from Dan.

'I'm sorry, she's...'

'Exaggerating,' said Connie.

'Slightly. Slightly exaggerating,' said Minnie.

Alex grinned broadly, 'Rabid moose! That's quite an imagination you have!'

'Musto!' called Billy.

The dog was sniffing about on the shore, typically busy, looking for crabs, sea slugs and worms.

Dan pulled off his cap and wiped his brow. 'It is perfectly safe here.'

‘And very quiet,’ said Connie. ‘So peaceful.’

‘Except...’ Now, they all looked at Billy. ‘Except for ... the fire.’

‘Fire?’ asked Cristy.

Billy pointed at the mountain. ‘Forest fire. Massive, devastating forest fire.’

‘Yes!’ Minnie nodded at Billy. ‘Devastating forest fire. In the forest!’

Dan waved a hand vaguely eastwards. ‘Way over on the other side of the mountain. It’s out now. Very much out.’

‘Oh sure, yeah, we heard about that,’ said Sam. ‘Saw the smoke, for weeks.’

‘So, this is your summer vacation trip?’ asked Connie.

‘Yeah, Sam’s been taking us all over,’ said Alex. ‘Fishing, relaxing. I do photography. Cristy does not have my sea legs, it has to be said. She has great legs but not sea legs.’ He laughed. No one else did. ‘We’d love a few days ashore if you have any vacancies at all.’

‘Do we ever!’ said Dan. ‘We’ve been closed due to the fire. Take your pick. We’re in this cabin here, while we’re re-building. But the others are empty.’

‘Oh, wow, they’re all so cute.’ Cristy pointed at cabin number four up on the rise. ‘How about that one up there?’

‘Good choice,’ said Minnie. ‘The white one. Soon to be pink. We’re re-painting them all soon.’

Dan looked at Minnie. ‘Are we?’

Musto came bounding on to the deck. He sniffed everyone in turn, and received strokes and pats with glee.

Billy turned to the teenage boy. ‘Hi Marshal. This is my dog, Musto. Are you good at math?’

Marshal gazed resolutely at his phone. ‘Hi. No. Got wifi here?’

Cristy grasped the boy’s wrist. ‘Marshal! Please.’

‘Sixteen year olds,’ said Alex. ‘What are ya gonna do?’

‘Accidentally drop their phone in the sea?’ Minnie suggested as she brushed past Marshal and marched up towards cabin number one.

‘Minnie...’ began Dan, but he let her go.



Standing inside the cabin, slightly back from the window, Minnie watched Dan and Connie lead

the couple up the slope to cabin number four as Musto bounded on ahead with Billy. The boy, Marshal, still looking at his phone, was following slowly. He stopped to kick a stone. It didn't roll very far, and he picked it up and flung it at the sea. It bounced off a rock and plopped into the water just beyond the swash where the waves lapped at the narrow beach.

Minnie pulled a wooden chair out from the table and sat gazing out of the window. Sam, now back at the big white boat anchored out by the first small island, was retying the dinghy. Three white gulls sitting on the sky-blue roof of the pilothouse flapped and lifted away when Sam stepped aboard.

It was strange for Minnie to see a boat anchored out there. They rarely had visitors from the sea. Sometimes cabin renters took one of their two rowing boats to explore the islands and to fish for their supper, but there had been no renters since the forest fire had sparked into life many, many weeks ago.

Minnie thought of the times she and her mom would paddle a canoe along the shore and round the closest islands. They would catch fish from

lines dangled casually from the canoe, sometimes a small salmon and sometimes sea trout, which was her favourite. They would grill them on the deck of the cabin, their old cabin, now demolished, the cabin where Minnie was born and where her mother had died.

A toppling blast of sadness hit her and she put her head on her folded arms; her shoulders shuddered as she wept. Waves of sorrow would sometimes sweep over the twelve-year-old and she'd feel she was drowning in grief and all she could do was go climb up her tree and wait for the wind to blow her tears dry.

There was a knock at the door. It opened slowly.

'Hello-dee-doo-daa,' said Billy. 'That's what the British say instead of hi.'

'Do they?' mumbled Minnie from her elbow.

'Yes, they do. You OK?'

Minnie nodded.

Backing out, Billy slowly pulled the door shut. 'In that case, cheerio!'