

THE LAST MUNRO

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

NORMAN HADLEY

CHAPTER 1

My Dad's mad, you know. No, really, he is. And it's not just that he's mad, he's mad *about* something and that something is mountains. He says ever since he was a boy he's been as keen as mustard about climbing mountains. I'm not sure mustard is keen, though. At least, I'm not keen on it.

I'm Mirrie by the way. That's short for Miranda. My full name's a bit flouncy for me. Some Mirandas shorten it to Randy but I read somewhere that that means something rude. Dad says he got the idea for my name from a play by a man called William Shakespeare who lived five hundred years ago. But I don't live five hundred years ago. I live now.

And the place where we live? It's a little tumbledown bungalow on the outskirts of a big town called Lancaster. Dad says Lancaster isn't big at all, but it is to me. When I say 'tumbledown' I don't really mean that it's about to collapse. It's just that all the paint is peeling and the gutters all leak when it rains. We didn't buy the bungalow for the building but for the land, Dad says. He likes growing carrots and cabbages in long rows down the sunny side by the hedge, and shouts at the cats that wander in and treat his fruit beds as a litter tray.

I like the garden, too. Apart from the vegetable patch, it's all wild and overgrown with little dens and hidey-holes where Esme and I can squirrel ourselves away and play. Sometimes we pretend we can't hear Dad calling us in for tea and he normally gives up after a few minutes. Then we get hungry anyway and crawl out to surprise him. We usually get told off for having grubby knees, but Dad's tellings-off aren't much to worry about.

You're probably wondering who Esme is. She's not a sister, although I sometimes pretend she is. She's my rag doll, about twenty centimetres tall, who wears a Spanish Flamenco dancer's dress. She can't wear anything else, because she's sewn into her outfit. She's so dirty now that she looks like a raggedy urchin, but Dad says she would drop to bits if we washed her.

I don't have a real sister, or a real brother. I've got lots of friends at school, though. Suzie is my best friend. She's in my class. I don't get to play with children at the weekend very much, because we only stay at home if the weather on the mountains is atrocious. If the weather is even slightly OK, we jump on Dad's noisy motor bike and zoom off to the Lake District or even Scotland to climb as many mountains as Dad can persuade me up.

Actually, he doesn't have to try to hard, because I love it, too. Not as much as Dad, but then I don't think *anyone* loves mountains as much as Dad. In fact, I don't think anyone loves *anything* as much as Dad loves mountains. I started by being

carried until I was two years old, then Dad set me down on my tiny feet in the long, wavy grass and pointed at a distant summit cairn, promising I could have a sweet if I walked all the way. In the end, I *ran* the whole way, and he gave me two sweets. I can't remember any of this, of course, because this was eight years ago. But Dad has a framed picture on the wall, of me in a little fluffy all-in-one suit, looking like a tiny snowman.

By now you will have worked out that I am ten years old. I am in year five, Miss Heversham's class at Quernmore Primary School. I am good at Numeracy and Literacy but I struggle with boring subjects like Geography. Miss Heversham starts going on and on about hill farming, and I stare out the window at Clougha Pike and think of all the kindly shepherds that Dad and I have met on our walks up hills.

I haven't mentioned Mum yet. She doesn't live with us. We don't talk about her very much. Dad used to talk about her all the time, because he thought I needed to hear about her, until told him he didn't have to, because I wasn't too upset. They're separated you see. They're not divorced, because they never got married in the first place. Sally Ancram's mum and dad got divorced last year, and they had been married for ages.

Dad always blames himself. If the subject ever comes up, he says it was his love of the mountains that came between them. He says they used to do lots of walking together, but she lost interest when she got big and fat with me inside her and she

couldn't go as fast. He says it was all his fault because he was getting even keener.

I don't get on with Mum so well. She's OK, but she's much stricter than Dad. Not that I mind grown ups being strict. No, it's more the way she's so *quiet* around me. It's funny really, because I look a lot like her. We both have shiny black bobbed hair, bright green eyes and freckly noses. Dad sometimes looks at me all mistily, and I can tell what he's thinking. Sometimes he mutters something about being the 'spit of Demelza,' and reaches for the whisky bottle. One night, I swear I saw tears in his eyes, but grown ups don't cry, do they?

I think Mum did. When they argued a lot, I'd lie awake in my bed, cuddling Esme. Dad was always very calm and quiet. He used words like 'therefore' and 'reasonable' a lot. Mum seemed to shout and get upset, and I think she must have cried. One night I crept downstairs and her eyes were running with make up.

Anyway, one sunny Friday afternoon, I was wandering home from school. I'm quite big now, so Dad doesn't need to pick me up from the school gate any more. He says it's OK as long as I stay near the bigger girls from year six. They don't like me walking with them because they want to talk about silly things like fashion and kissing boys. They never let me join in, especially Heather Potts, who sticks her nose in the air every time I see her.

When I reached the end of our road, Heather's gang wandered off across the playing fields, and I set off down the street. I could forget all about what Miss Heversham had said about the Romans, and start thinking about where Dad would take me at the weekend. He would be home by now. He always was on a Friday, making sure he'd got the tent and the motorbike ready. But on this particular Friday, something about the house didn't seem right as I came down the path, past the flowers flopping over the gravel.

I was even more spooked out when the door didn't open. I gave it an extra shove, just in case the wood had stuck after the rain earlier that week, but it still wouldn't budge. 'Dad,' I called, 'let me in!' But no answer came.

Just as I was wondering what was going on, Mrs Mayhew from next door came bustling out of her house in a big flowery dress. 'Oh you poor dear,' she said. 'You'd better come in!'

'Why, what's happened?' I asked.

She still wouldn't answer. 'Just come in dear, and I'll get you a glass of pop!'

I gave her a look. 'Is it something to do with Dad?'

She still couldn't bring herself to talk to me properly. I think she thought I was still a baby. 'Come in dear, and we'll see if we can get the cartoons on the telly.'

I shrugged my shoulders and followed her into her house. It was dark and smelled of budgerigars. She had one in a cage in the living room and some twittering canaries in an aviary in her back garden.

‘So what’s happened?’ I asked.

She ignored me and fussed around getting a glass of lemonade. She looked very upset.

‘Well, dear, I’m not really sure, but he rang to ask me to take you in. You see, he’s been taken to hospital.’

CHAPTER 2

I gaped at her. ‘Hospital? What for? He’s never gone and fallen off his motorbike, has he?’

‘No dear, he didn’t mention anything like that. I think he’s just come over a bit poorly.’

I looked out of the window at her battered car, a rusty old Austin Metro, on the drive outside. ‘Would you take me to see him?’ I asked. ‘Please.’

‘Oh no, dear, I don’t think that would be a very good idea. It would be far too upsetting to see you father in a pickle like that, with tubes coming out of his nose and everything.’

‘How do you know he’s got tubes coming out of his nose? Have you seen him?’

Mrs Mayhew looked at the floor and went a bit pink. She shook her head and the loose flap of skin under her chin waggled to and fro. ‘No, dear, I’m just imagining the worst. You know, after Mr Mayhew took ill last year...’

Mr Mayhew had been a lovely man, always ready with a joke I could tell my friends, or a magic trick with a shiny coin and a flowery handkerchief. Unfortunately, he had died of stomach cancer the previous summer. If Mrs Mayhew was supposed to be reassuring me, she wasn’t doing a very good job.

I fixed her with a firm stare. 'I need to see him. If you can't give me a lift, I'll just walk or catch the bus or something.'

Although I didn't really know what I was going to do if she didn't help, I must have looked pretty fierce. 'All right,' she said, 'I'll get my keys. Follow me.' She walked out of the house in her bedroom slippers, with her apron still tied around her. I think she's getting a bit forgetful these days. One day she came round to borrow some garden shears, came round and drank four cups of tea, and left the shears on the kitchen table! Dad says she'd forget her head if it wasn't stuck to her shoulders.

It had been a long time since I had ridden in a car. We only have the motorbike, because Dad has never learned to drive a car. When I was little and Mum was still around, she rode on the back of the motor bike and I sat in a shiny red side car. That's like a tiny bumper car stuck to the side of the motorbike. Dad's taken it off now and stuck it in the garage.

Mrs Mayhew's car was even noisier than Dad's motorbike, and scarcely any more comfortable. She filled the driver's seat with her perfumed flowery bulk, her slippers skidding about on the pedals. She drove as fast as the whining engine would allow, and soon we were screeching round the turn into the hospital entrance.

After we parked, I ran across the car park to the automatic doors. Mrs Mayhew was lumbering along behind,

panting heavily. In the entrance, a pretty nurse with a brown, smiley face and gleaming teeth sat behind the desk. 'I need to see Dad,' I said.

'I see, my love, and what's your Dad's name?'

I had to think for a bit. I had to stop myself from saying 'He's just called Dad,' which would have been really silly because the nurse wouldn't have known who I meant. 'Carpenter,' I said. 'Mr Carpenter. First name is Joe.'

The nurse tapped a few keys on her computer. She seemed to be struggling to find him. What was taking so long? There was a folding door on the desk to let the nurses in and out. Without thinking, I slipped under the hatch and started looking at the screen with her. Just then Mrs Mayhew panted into the entrance. I could tell she was going to tell me off, but the nurse could tell I was half frantic about Dad, and put her hand on my shoulder. 'Come and help me look, then,' she said.

I scanned down the pages and pages of names. How could so many people have to go to hospital? Were they all falling off motorbikes, crashing their cars or contracting malaria? 'There he is!' I shouted. I pointed a finger at the screen, until it nearly wobbled off its stand.

The nurse rubbed her eyes. 'I'm sorry, my love, I can't see for looking.' I wondered what she meant by that. Then she said, 'I've been on shift since eight.' I think she meant eight in the

morning, so she must have been exhausted. She rubbed her eyes again. The palms of her hands were unexpectedly white, as if she had been making pastry and rubbing her hands in the flour. She looked up at Mrs Mayhew, unwilling to catch my eye. 'He's in I. C.,' she said in a mock whisper.

I gave *her* a look, then. Everyone seemed determined to treat me like a baby. 'I know what Intensive Care means,' I said. 'It's bad, isn't it?'

The nurse looked back with a kind but tired face, her glasses nearly falling off the end of her nose. 'I'm afraid you can't see him yet because visiting hours start at six.'

There are times when it's helpful to be small. I slipped back under the desk, straight through the arms of the nurse as she tried to grab me. Mrs Mayhew made a lunge for me too, but I was too quick for her. I ran off down the corridor, my school shoes squeaking on the shiny floor. I didn't know where I was going; there were miles and miles of corridors, all looking the same. There were hundreds of signs with long words like 'Osteopathy Clinic' and 'Paediatric Ward' but no sign of intensive care.

As I ran round a corner, I saw two huge security guards running down the corridor towards me. The nurse on the front desk must have rung them up on their walkie-talkies. I screeched to a halt and ran back round the corner, taking a

different turn. I'm quite good at running at school, but that's in gym shoes. One of the guards was quite fat and I seemed to be leaving him well behind, but his friend was much faster and was gaining on me all the time.

Every time I came to a junction, I took a sudden turn to throw him off, but he kept lumbering after me, shouting, 'Someone stop that kid!' In front of me, a hospital porter was pushing an empty bed on wheels and he turned it across the corridor, blocking my way. I was trapped now. The guard was behind me and the porter was standing by in front of the empty bed, which was too high to jump over.

Again, my size came to my rescue. I slipped underneath the bed and ran off down the corridor, taking the next right, then the next left to lose the security guard. After a few more turns I was able to slow down to a walk, then I had to grab hold of a potted plant to get my breath back. Just as I was standing there gasping, I saw the entrance to Intensive care; I had made it!

The only problem was, there was another nurse sat at the desk by the door, so I wasn't sure how I would get in. I took a few deep breaths and slid through the door, hoping that my face wasn't too pink. I breathed through my nose to look as calm as I could.

'Good' (breathe) 'Afternoon' I said.

‘Hello little lady,’ said the nurse. She was quite old, maybe forty, and had long blonde hair tied back in a tight plait. ‘You do realise it’s not visiting hours yet?’

‘Of (breathe) course’ I said. ‘I’m with the school trip. We’re learning how hospitals work.’ It was a terrible lie, but it was the best I could come up with on the spot.

The lady regarded me sternly. ‘Well no one told *me* about this. Where are the rest of your class?’

‘Aren’t they here yet?’ I asked innocently. ‘Miss Heversham’s class? I am surprised because I got lost as we came through the maze of corridors, so I came straight here and it looks like I’m first.’

She didn’t look at all impressed. ‘Sit there and wait for your teacher to arrive then,’ she said, pointing at a row of chairs. I meekly sat down and gazed at the ceiling. Luckily, the phone rang soon after, and she got distracted looking through a filing cabinet. I quietly got up and tiptoed across to the big double doors that led into the intensive care ward.

It was a gloomy place in there. Everyone seemed to be attached to machines that beeped every time their hearts beat, with tubes coming out of them, just like Mrs Mayhew had said. I slid past a couple of women who looked like they had been in a car crash. Surely Dad wouldn’t look like that?

Then I heard a familiar voice. 'Hello, Mirrie, love. What are you doing here?'

CHAPTER 3

There wasn't a scratch on him; that much was obvious. He looked older though, stretched out on the bed looking more tired than I had ever seen him. His thin face was lined and pale, framed by his bright gingery beard and long curly hair. You see, my Dad's a bit of a hippie at heart. I flung myself on him, wrapping my arms tightly round his neck. 'You haven't got tubes up your nose!' I said. It was all I could think to say.

'Easy, tiger,' he said. 'Maybe not up my nose but there's one on my wrist, so don't knock it out or the nurses will have a fit.' He lifted his hand to show the needle jabbing into his arm, connected by a tube to a clear plastic bag with some liquid in. It all looked really spooky. 'Anyway, how did you find me? How did you get here? What, come to think of it, are you up to, Mirrie? I thought Mrs Mayhew was looking after you.'

'She did,' I said. 'At least, she got me a glass of lemonade. I was even *going* to drink it but she said you were in hospital so I made her bring me in the car.'

Dad looked at me with that funny way he has, as if he's pretending to be stern but I can tell he's really proud of me. 'You

can be a right bossy boots when the inclination takes you,' he whispered.

Just then, Mrs Mayhew came in with the quicker of the two security guards. I thought about hiding under the bed but there didn't seem much point. 'Here she is, the little minx,' said the guard. 'Right little lady, I'm going to have to ask you to come with me.'

Then Dad said, 'let her stay here, she's come a long way to find me. She's shown both guts and gumption to get here.' I wasn't sure what gumption was, but I checked it out in the dictionary later. It means initiative or practical sense. One of the things about living with Dad is he's forever using long words, and whenever I ask what he means, he tells me to look it up in the dictionary. I'm already very good at looking things up....

Anyway, the guard didn't like having to run after a tricky girl or being told what to do, so he said, 'I'm sorry sir, but I'm going to have to take her away.' His voice was very deep and firm and as he spoke, he grabbed my arm so tightly that it hurt.

Even though Dad was very sleepy on whatever medicine was in the plastic bag, he spoke very slowly but firmly, 'let go of my daughter or I'll put *you* in Intensive Care.' Somehow, even though Dad had made a lame joke of the situation, and even though he was sick in bed, and even though the security guard was twice his size, I felt the grip loosen from around my arm.

The guard grunted, 'ten minutes then, and no more,' and strode out through the double doors, trying to look important even though Dad had told *him* off.

Dad turned to Mrs Mayhew. 'I can't thank you enough, Cathy, for bringing Mirrie down this evening. I know it wasn't exactly your idea, and I will have words with her about hijacking your car, but can you give us a moment?' Mrs Mayhew nodded and slunk out of the room. In a moment I could hear her loudly telling the security guard all about her budgerigar, and I could see him nodding behind the glass door, pretending to be interested.

'So Dad, what's happened,' I asked.

'Something and nothing,' he shrugged.

'What does that mean?'

'You'll have to look it up.'

It was time to give *him* one of my stern looks, even if he *was* ill. 'Come on Dad, I haven't got my dictionary with me. Talk to me so I can understand straight away.'

'Well, it's diabetes. It's a condition to do with sugar levels in the blood. My body can't make enough energy from the food I eat so I'm in danger of suddenly running out of steam. As I found out when I passed out in the lab today.' Lab, by the way, is short for laboratory, because my Dad works in the Physics department at Lancaster University. He's a very clever scientist.

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘Keep going, kid. Just keep going.’

‘You can’t do that, you’re ill. The doctors and nurses won’t let you.’

‘That’s just it; they’re very strict in here. They want me to rest for, like, two days! You try telling them I’ve only got ten Munro peaks left!’

I rolled my eyes in despair. As I said at the beginning, he’s totally mad. I’d better explain, so you don’t have to look it up in the dictionary, that a *Munro* is a special kind of Scottish mountain. A long time ago, a man called Sir Hugh Munro wrote a list of all the mountains in Scotland higher than three thousand feet (that’s about nine hundred metres). Since then, thousands of mountaineers have set themselves the task of climbing all of them. The trouble is, there are two hundred and eighty four of them, and so climbing every single one can take a lifetime.

‘Dad, you daftie, you shouldn’t be thinking of Munros when you’re in this state. For once in your life you need to do as you’re told and follow the doctors’ advice.’

Dad cast me a baleful look. ‘See what I mean? *No one* understands, not even you. Even if my left leg dropped off, I’d hop up the last ten hills. I *have* to do this.’

‘That’s it,’ I said, ‘I give up with you. I think I’ll go and live with Mum instead. At least she’s got some sense!’

Dad looked seriously at me for a moment, and then laughed. I laughed, too, even though I didn’t really mean to. ‘No you won’t,’ he said simply. I had to admit defeat because he was right. Even if he is a loony, he’s more fun.

Just then, the security guard came back through the double doors, with a stern looking doctor. The guard looked a bit sheepish because he should have thrown me out straight away. ‘Right, Missy; time you were on your way. Your neighbour ‘ere ‘as kindly offered to tek you in fer the night.’

‘That’s right,’ chipped in Mrs Mayhew. ‘Don’t you worry yourself, Joe; I’ll take good care of her. She’ll want for nothing!’

No one seemed to be actually asking me. I wanted my Dad. I wanted my own bed, and a cuddle with Esme would have been good, too. Then Dad gave me a nod to say it was OK, but was there a bit of a wink in there too? Sometimes it can be hard to tell with him. Although *he’s* the grown-up in our house, he’s far more mischievous than I’ll ever be. Sometimes, when I can get away with being extra cheeky, I ask him if he’s ever going to grow up. He always says he has no plans to be sensible. That’s why I have to worry about him all the time.

There didn’t seem to be much I could do. There was no point making a fuss, even though I didn’t want to spend a lonely

night in Mrs Mayhew's spare bed. I gave Dad a big kiss and said goodbye. Although I was sad, I didn't cry in front of all those grown-ups. I'd save that for later, when I was on my own. As we were leaving the ward, I heard the doctor talking to Dad. I didn't hear everything, but the gist of it was 'not too serious but we'll have to keep you in for observation.'

As we made our way back in Mrs Mayhew's car, I was very quiet. Mrs Mayhew kept chattering on about absolutely nothing, but I didn't blame her. She was only trying to cheer me up and take my mind off things. When we got back to her house, she made dinner for us. She didn't ask what I wanted. 'I'll do you some turkey dinosaurs and oven chips, dear,' she said. 'I always keep the freezer stocked for when my grandchildren come to stay.'

The thing is, I hate children's food. I eat all sorts of grown-up things when I'm with Dad, like Parmesan, broccoli and asparagus – things that children aren't supposed to like. In any case, I was so worried about Dad that I wasn't really hungry. All the same, I tucked in because I didn't want to be impolite.

After dinner, Mrs Mayhew looked me up and down and said, 'Right dear, let's get you bathed and off to bed.'

I looked at my watch. It wasn't yet seven o'clock. 'It's all right Cathy,' I said, trying to sound grown up, 'Dad lets me stay up 'til ten these days.'

She still wasn't *really* listening. 'Nonsense dear, you must get your sleep after such an upsetting day. And it's Mrs Mayhew, by the way.'

There wasn't any point arguing. Besides, even if I wasn't ready for sleep, at least I'd get some peace up in the little room upstairs. I meekly did as I was told, wallowing in the soapy water 'til my skin was as wrinkled as an elephant's, then sliding down under Mrs Mayhew's thick, scratchy quilt. I lay there for hours, missing my own bed, missing Esme but most of all missing Dad.

Eventually I drifted off to sleep, but it wasn't a restful sleep. Swirling dreams descended from the ceiling to envelop me as I wriggled on the lumpy mattress. I seemed to be in a tiny car, bumping around on a winding road. In my dream, Esme was with me, tucked under my right arm. I heard Dad's voice, murmuring to me to go back to sleep. Then I dreamt I was being carried by a huge hairy animal with leathery skin. All night long, the dreams spun round my head, getting more and more preposterous.

Until morning, that is. I woke to find myself sat in the little red sidecar, stationary. I looked down. I was still in my pyjamas, with a thick rug wrapped around me and Esme on my lap. I wiped away the condensation from the windscreen, my fingers squeaking on the cold, misty glass. Outside there was a magnificent sunrise glowing over a towering range ofmountains!

Then I saw Dad, leaning against the motorbike with his leather jacket on. So it had been him carrying me about in the night. He saw I was awake and leaned over the sidecar. 'Morning, kid,' he said. 'Ready for another hill?'

CHAPTER 4

It only took me a few seconds to go from bewilderment to anger. I fiddled with the cold metal clasp that held the sidecar roof down before I could ping it open. Then I climbed out into the cold morning air in my pyjamas. ‘Dad, what do you think you’re doing?’ I shouted.

‘Just keeping to the plan, kid. I told you, it takes more than a bit of diabetes to put me off.’

‘But the doctors! They’ll kill you! You can’t just sneak out of your hospital bed, kidnap your daughter from the neighbours and zoom off to.....where are we?’

‘Scotland,’ he said. ‘Glen Falloch. That’s Ben More over there, with its head in the clouds.’ He said it with his misty voice, as if the magic of the mountains would explain everything.

‘Don’t *Glen Falloch* me, Dad,’ I shouted. ‘You’ve been very irresponsible!’ I was so annoyed with him that I couldn’t say irresponsible right.

His eyes twitched nervously over to a group of bikers and car driver standing in the queue for what looked like a van selling burgers. They were all watching, with amusement as a

ten-year old girl in her pyjamas told off her biker Dad in a roadside lay-by. Even I saw the funny side, then.

Taking his chance to soften me up, Dad whispered, 'you must be famished kid. I didn't have any time to pack any food, so I thought we'd stop off here for breakfast. I've had a cup of tea but I must say their vegetarian options looked none too appetising. What can I get you?'

'I'll have a hamburger, then,' I said, jutting out my chin. We don't eat meat at home, and he knew I was only having a burger to get my own back. I could see him wince, but he knew better than to argue.

He joined the back of the queue while I found myself a coat in the motorbike's storage pannier. The other people in the line had enjoyed our performance so much that they let him go straight to the front. Pretty soon, we were cuddled up on a creaky old bench, with the rug over our knees, tucking into our greasy breakfast. Dad put an arm around me, and came over all fatherly. 'It's all right kid. It's true that diabetes can be a very serious condition. It'll mean big changes to the way I eat and I'll need daily injections of a chemical called insulin to help keep my energy levels up. But I quizzed one of the nurses last night, and I reckon I can get through the weekend OK. I called in on a late-night garage on the way and bought some special chocolate for diabetic people.'

‘What does that do that ordinary chocolate doesn’t?’ I asked.

‘It gives out the right kind of energy.’

‘What about these injections? Will you need to carry a syringe with needles like a drug addict?’

Dad looked at me with his worried face. ‘How do you know what drug addicts do?’

‘Oh, we did it at school. Miss Heversham says only stupid people mess about with needles.’

‘And she’s absolutely right. No, I’ll get a special kind of injector, more like a ballpoint pen. You just push it against yourself, and it gently punctures the skin, giving you just the right amount of insulin. Your Auntie Miriam has got one.’

I was quiet for a bit, then I said, ‘But if you’ve got it, and your sister...does that mean diabetes runs in our family?’

‘I’m not sure, kid. I had a lot to take in last night, so I didn’t have the nerve to ask that one. We’ll get you checked out when we get back home, just to be sure. Don’t forget, even if it is hereditary, you’ve got half of Mum’s genes as well.’

By then I had had my hamburger and was starting to feel better. Maybe Dad was right and he’d be OK. ‘So, kid,’ he said. ‘Get those pyjamas off and get your walking gear on. We’ve a hill to climb.’

Not for the first time, I looked at him as if he were out of his mind. 'Not here!' I hissed. 'I can't get changed in front of all these people.' That's the thing with having a hippie Dad; nothing matters to him. He'd happily run around starkers in the middle of Lancaster. 'Honestly, Dad, you can be a real embarrassment sometimes!'

The people by the burger van were starting to show interest in us again, wondering who this weird hairy man was with his argumentative daughter. Happily, the lady behind the counter came to my rescue. 'You can borrow the wee Portaloo, lassie! It's less than savoury in there but you'll have your privacy.'

'Thank you.' I said. 'At least *someone* appreciates a young lady's need for dignity!' Everyone laughed at that, so I laughed too, even though I was being serious. I got my gear from the pannier and marched off across the lay-by, littered with squashed Coke cans and polystyrene chip trays to the tiny toilet.

She was right, it was a bit grubby, and something of a squeeze to get changed in, even for someone small like me. At last I was ready and I came back out, looking smart in my blue tracksuit bottoms and matching fleece. My walking boots were clean and freshly polished and I looked like a proper walker. I even started to feel keen. 'All right, Dad, which hill are you dragging me up today?'

‘It’ll be *you* dragging *me* if I can’t get my blood sugar levels right. Anyway, today’s mission is Ben Challum. It’s one of the ten still left on my list.’

I rolled my eyes again. ‘You and your Munros! Come on; let’s get up there before I change my mind.’

The day was bright now, and the morning chill was giving way to a warm, sunny day. We parked the motorbike by a farm full of noisy dogs and set off up a wide glen, with the West Highland railway line running along the side. For once, Dad set a sensible pace. Normally he zooms off up mountains because he is so fit, but I could tell that today he was careful not to suddenly run out of energy.

I was worried too. If he suddenly fainted, I would have to run back to the glen to get the Mountain Rescue Team to come out and carry him down on a stretcher. That was too horrible to contemplate, because Dad always insisted it was ‘cheating’ the mountain if you couldn’t get down by yourself. He was *unbelievably* strict about this. One day I asked him if was better to die than to get rescued. He didn’t give me a straight answer, but said something about always having to ‘look the mountains in the eye’. I decided to put it from my mind as much as I could.

I did get very worried, though, as we neared the summit, and he started to slow down even more. His face was looking pale and tired again, and he looked cold, even though the day was

warm. As we climbed higher, I even noticed his lips were turning a sort of grey-blue colour. I'd read somewhere that that meant the blood wasn't getting to everywhere it's needed. When I mentioned it to Dad, he seemed sleepy and confused, but all he said was, 'No sense stopping yet, kid, we're nearly there.' He had a point, because the top was only another two hundred metres to go.

Anyway, there was no need for mountain rescue teams on Ben Challum. After another minute's steady plodding, we made it to the windy summit. The view was spectacular, round from Ben More to Ben Lui, with patches of snow still decorating the higher peaks. We huddled together in a little sheltered hollow and had lunch. I had another hamburger, now cold, from the burger van. Dad had a packet of crisps and some more of the special diabetic chocolate. I watched him carefully, noticing how the colour seemed to flood back into his cheeks as his energy returned.

'Dad,' I said, 'you shouldn't have come here, this was very silly in your condition!'

He turned to look at me. 'Come on, Mirrie; give it a rest being so bossy. Don't forget; I've only got nine Munros to go, now!'

It's impossible to argue with him when he's like this, so I said, very gently. 'You *do* know we shouldn't have come, *don't* you, you silly, loveable old fool.'

He put his arm around me. Very quietly, he said. 'Yes, it *was* a bit foolhardy. I'm sorry if I've worried you. You shouldn't fret, though, Mirrie; I'll be OK. I've been on hundreds of mountains in a worse state than this.'

'What, have you had diabetes before?'

'No, altitude sickness. I had it *really* bad on Mount McKinley.'

'That's not in Scotland, is it Dad?'

'No, it's way up north in Alaska. That was back in the days before you were born, when I used to climb *really* big mountains. That was even before I met your Mum.'

'Did Mum climb really big mountains, too?'

'Not as big as McKinley. But she'd have easily managed a hill this size. Come on; let's get down to the motorbike before I run out of energy again. A nibble of those chocolate bars only seems to give me an hour and then I'm left with all the energy of a damp rag.'

We set off back down the hill, holding hands. I poked Esme's head out of my rucksack so she could see the view, and we whistled a cheery tune together, all the way back to the

motorbike. I was tired by now. The shadows were lengthening on the far side of the glen and I was worn out from worrying if Dad was going to make it down OK.

There was no one around by the motorbike, so we stripped off our sweaty walking gear.

I had to ride in the sidecar, because Dad hadn't packed my biking leathers, but I didn't mind because I could rest in the sidecar seat. Dad started the growling engine and we set off down the farm track, back to the main road. I was just starting to nod off when Dad stopped the bike and announced he had found a great place for wild camping. I should explain that 'wild' camping is just camping out in the countryside, without a proper campsite. Dad says there's no point paying for a patch of land to pitch the tent when there are thousands of square miles of countryside going for free.

We set up the tent by the side of a lonely loch. A little gravelly beach ran down to the water, where fish were rising to grab any insects that came too close. All was still and peaceful. Dad and I spent a while cuddled together on a rock, dangling our feet in the cool water. He was so close to me that I didn't so much *hear* his voice as *feel* it, vibrating in my ribcage. He could tell I was dozing off again so he said, 'Come on, kid, let's get dinner going.'

'I thought you hadn't got anything,' I said.

‘That’s right, just a few bread rolls. The rest..we’ll have to catch!’ I looked round at his twinkling eyes, and he pulled a little case out of his pocket, like the sort of thing I keep a compass in at school. Inside were some fishing flies and some very fine thread, as fine as one of my hairs. He showed me how to tie the pretend flies on the end of the string, and how to throw the fly onto the water so the fish would nibble on the fly and get stuck. We sat on the rock again, waiting for the fish to bite.

‘I don’t get you, Dad,’ I said. ‘How can you be a vegetarian yet pull a fish from the water.’

He looked at me in that funny way he has. ‘Well kid, plenty of people will tell you that fish don’t have central nervous systems but the honest truth is they aren’t as, well, cuddly as mammals. Not so much like us. Anyway, stop expecting me to be consistent. Any adult worth his salt is a mass of contradictions.’

‘What are contradictions Dad? And remember, I haven’t brought the dictionary.’

He looked at me wistfully. ‘Everyone tries to fit their beliefs together, but it doesn’t always work. Take Mum, for example. She believes that women should have a job so they don’t spend their whole lives washing pots and changing nappies. But *she* also believes that a child needs its Mum when it’s small. When you came along, she had to pack it in at the bookshop because she couldn’t manage doing both. Anyway,

stop arguing and keep fishing. If we don't catch anything, we'll have to make do with bread and butter.'

In a while, we had a row of little brown trout laid out before us. Dad cut out the innards, because they're bad for you, and we put the fishing lines away. Then Dad said, 'You know what else I forgot to pack last night? The stove!'

I gave him an especially hard stare for that. 'We can't eat them *raw*, though, Dad!'

He looked at me seriously. 'Why not? They do in Japan. I thought you'd studied the Japanese taste for raw fish in your school project?'

I grimaced. 'Yes, but it sounds *disgusting*. I'd rather go hungry!'

His face broke into an impish grin. 'Don't worry, kid, you won't have to. We'll rustle up a camp-fire.'

There was a little wood of birch trees by the side of the loch. It was hard work, gathering fallen branches, sliding about on the mossy, bouldery ground as the little midges swarmed round our heads. Eventually, we had a pile of wood that looked enough, and Dad showed me how to arrange the smallest twigs at the bottom with the thicker branches, about as thick as my wrist, on the top. He set fire to it with the help of an oily rag from the motorbike pannier. Soon, the wood was blazing,

sending a column of smoke and sparks straight up into the evening sky.

‘The next thing we need, kid, is a road sign.’

My eyes were wide. ‘Why would we need one of those, Dad?’

He grinned again. ‘To cook on, like a griddle.’ We have a griddle on the cooking range in the bungalow. I couldn’t see how a road sign could do the same job.

Meanwhile Dad was grinning like a gargoyle. ‘It just so happens that there’s a *Men at Work* sign just down the road by the bend.’

I looked down the road, and there, lying on the grass fifty metres away, was a triangular sign. The workmen had replaced some of the tarmac but forgotten to take the sign away. I looked at Dad suspiciously. ‘You planned this, all along, didn’t you?’

He looked pleased with himself. ‘Well, I did say I’d found the perfect camp site. It even has its own cooking facilities.’

‘Won’t the workmen mind us stealing it?’

‘No kid, we’ll be tidying up the countryside.’

‘What about the paint? Won’t that poison us?’

‘It’ll be all right, Mirrie. We’ll burn the paint off first but we’ll cook the fish on the back. I promise you’ll be fine.’

I don't know why, but I believed him. I know he's a funny old chap, and anyone else's Dad would have stopped off at the Little Chef, but I love my Dad.

Anyway, Dad's crazy plan worked a treat, or should I say it worked a trout! We fried the fish in the butter, and then lifted them off with a tent peg that Dad had wiped clean on his trousers. We put the lovely hot buttery fish between the bread rolls and ate them while the sun went down behind the mountains and strange bird calls echoed mournfully across the loch.

After tea, I felt sleepiness swoop down for me again. I rested against Dad's shoulder and closed my eyes. I could have got up and gone to bed, but I wanted Dad to carry me. After a few light snores he got the message and picked me up, laying me down gently in the tent. I was asleep in seconds.

CHAPTER 5

I woke to find sunlight streaming in through the open tent flap. Dad's sleeping bag was empty next to mine. In the distance I could hear splashing. I knew what he'd done. Sure enough, when I clambered out of the tent, there he was, swimming about in the loch.

'Morning kid, come on in, it's not as cold as it looks!'

'But Dad, suppose someone comes along, I can't strip off here!'

'Course you can Mirrie, the road's only tiny and it's a dead end. That's why I picked this spot; because it's so quiet. Anyway, we're off up Ben Lomond in a bit, so get yourself freshened up.' Then he went back to doing backstroke, his arms splashing noisily so that the sound carried across the still surface of the loch.

Once again there was no point in arguing with him; when he gets into one of his enthusiastic moods, you find yourself just going along with it. I stripped off, keeping one eye on the road. The water was freezing as I paddled out, so I waded up to thigh depth just to get used to it.

Dad seemed a long way out and there was something funny about the way he was swimming. He seemed to be swimming a stroke I'd never seen before, as if he was heading back towards me but not quickly enough to stay afloat. As I waded out to my waist, gasping anew at the shock of cold water round I middle, I watched him carefully. He seemed to be waving, so I waved back. I could hear him calling, but I couldn't make it out; something about 'Shark-lit, Chalk-late...Chocolate!'

Everything seemed to happen at once. Through the sleepy morning fog of my mind, I suddenly heard the note of alarm in his voice. He was in trouble! My Dad is normally a very strong swimmer, and seems totally immune to the cold, so an early morning swim was normal for him. Mrs Coleman, our swimming instructor at school, had shown us how to rescue another child in difficulties, but Dad was way too big for someone like me to save.

Then it struck me what had happened. He had suddenly run out of energy and was calling for the special diabetic chocolate! I started running back up the beach, the water making my shivering legs move in slow motion. Then I splashed out onto the grass, diving into the tent and spraying the sleeping bags with water. They didn't matter, I told myself. Dad was all that mattered right now. In the tent was the rucksack where I'd seen Dad put away the special chocolate. The zip was sticking as I frantically pulled at it. At last it came open, spilling chocolate

bars, money, toothbrushes and everything over the tent floor. Again, it didn't matter.

Grabbing one of the chocolate bars between my teeth, I ran back down into the loch, sending spray high up into the air, where the droplets were glistening in the early morning light. Down I went into the water, the cold making me gasp again. Dad was still above water but he was swimming too slowly. I swam towards him as fast as I could manage, gasping for breath between my gritted teeth, taking care not to drop the chocolate bar.

After what seemed like ages, I came level with Dad. He was looking very ill. His eyes were glassy and sleepy, and he moved like a drunken man. He saw me and started slowly treading water, so I trod water next to him and tried to get his attention. He muttered something that I couldn't catch. Then I realised that, with the chocolate between my teeth, I couldn't talk to him either.

In the end, I sort of panicked. The outer wrapper of the chocolate had slipped off in the excitement, leaving the silvery inner wrapper. I grabbed the bar from between my teeth and shoved it, wrapper and all, into Dad's mouth. He spluttered and choked on it for a while, then seemed to bite through the wrapper so the chocolate could melt into his mouth.

See rest of book