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Chapter One

My heart is thumping so fast, I feel like it wants to jump right out of my chest. My shoulder muscles are aching and my hands burn as they pull the oars. Behind me, I can hear Jim counting the strokes – two hundred and ten, two hundred and eleven ... As I lean backwards on each stroke, I can sense my ponytail brushing the floor of the boat – swish, swish, swish. The boat is rocking like crazy, and I wonder if I'm going to be thrown out. A sudden rush of ice-cold water hits me in the face, and drips down my cheeks, but I don't even blink. I have to keep going, no matter what. A small silvery fish flies past my face, just missing my nose. I want to give up, but I can hear Beth's voice from what feels like a million miles away.

'Keep going, Molly. You can do it. Don't stop now – you can't let the team down. We're almost there.'

It seems like a million years have passed before I hear the most beautiful sound in the world – the bell announcing the end of the race. I let go of the oars, and before I have time to check my hands for blisters, Beth is hugging me.

'We did it!' she shrieks. 'We did it!'

My legs are a bit wobbly as I climb out of the boat so I quickly sit down on the grass next to the washing line. Mum hands me a glass of water.

'Well done, darling,' she says. 'All you needed were three hundred strokes in your ten minutes, and you even went over that! You and Beth have beaten Jim and me in the Saturday challenge – again!'

* * *

I don't know what it feels like to row the whole way across the Atlantic, but I wonder if it feels a bit like this?

Even though I was rowing a battered old dinghy that Jim found in a skip somewhere.

Even though the boat was on the grass, and Mum had been rocking it from side to side while I rowed.

Even though the spray of water came from the garden hose that Jim was holding.

Even though the only fish in the garden came from an old fishing game Beth had found in the shed.

Even though the finishing bell was a saucepan and a wooden spoon.

Beth was dancing around the garden, singing 'We are the champions.' Mum and Jim were laughing like little kids. I lay back on the grass and tried to catch my breath.

My best friend Beth and her dad moved in with Mum and me ages ago. At first that was really weird, but now I was getting used to it, and sometimes I can hardly remember a time when they didn't live with us. Like all dads, Jim can be a bit annoying sometimes, but he comes up with the craziest and best ideas. The Saturday challenge was in its third week, and it was always Mum and Jim against Beth and me. The rules were a bit vague, but no one cared – mostly we were all too busy laughing for anything else to matter.

The first week, Jim set up a very complicated obstacle course in the garden, where you had to run the first half in odd wellies, and the second half with a glass of water in your pocket. The second week, we all had to pretend to be horses, jumping over bamboo canes propped up on kitchen chairs, with extra points for the best horsey sound effects. These things might sound a bit lame and stupid, but as long as you know there's no one planning to make a video and post it on YouTube, they are really, really fun.

After a while, everyone calmed down.

'That was so brilliant, Jim,' I said. 'I think that was the best challenge ever.'

'Thanks, Molly,' he said. 'I do my best – and wait till you see what I've got planned for next week.'

'Tell us, please, Dad!' said Beth. 'I don't think I can wait a whole week to find out.'

'Sorry, sweetie-pie,' he said as he put his arm around her. 'You're just going to have to be patient. Now let's go inside, I think it's time we ordered that takeaway you've been promised. How about we get a big pot of Irish stew?'

‘Noooo,’ I wailed. ‘I hate Irish stew more than anything in the world – except for maybe bacon and cabbage.’

Jim laughed. ‘I know, Molly,’ he said. ‘I’m just winding you up. How about we all get pizza?’

* * *

Much later, Beth and I were lying on her bed and she was telling me about the maths project she’s starting.

‘It’s going to be so cool,’ she said. ‘It’s all about pie charts.’

‘So, like apple pie and cherry pie and stuff?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘You *do* know that pie charts are a way of representing categorical data in a circular form?’

‘Er ... I might have heard Mrs Gallagher going on about something like that,’ I said. ‘But even thinking about it gave me a headache so I stopped listening.’

‘Sorry, Moll,’ she said. ‘But you know you’re going to have to do an exam on pie charts in a few weeks’ time, don’t you?’

‘I guess I’m hoping that if I don’t think about it, it won’t happen.’

‘That’s your best plan?’

‘Oh, Beth,’ I said. ‘It’s easy for you – you’re so good at maths, but even when I try I’m ...’

‘Hold it right there,’ she said. ‘It’s time we did something about this.’

She jumped off the bed, and pulled a notebook and some coloured pencils out of her bedside locker. Then she sat down next to me again.

OK,’ she said. ‘Imagine there are twenty kids in the class, and we asked them each what their favourite pie was. And if five of them say they like rhubarb pie, and four of them like blueberry pie and ...’

And for the next twenty minutes Beth wrote down stuff and drew stuff and it was like a miracle. For the first time ever, maths didn’t just make sense, it actually seemed easy.

‘Oh, Beth,’ I said. ‘I can’t believe it. I actually get it. I actually *get* maths. You’ve worked a miracle.’

She smiled. ‘And you can use pie charts in all kinds of ways. If you wanted to show how many people like different pets you could ...’

‘But then it would be called a pet chart, right – because a pie chart is just about pies?’

For a second she looked so disappointed in me, and then I laughed, and she punched my arm and she laughed too.

‘Hey,’ I said then. ‘Your dad has loads of pie charts on the wall of his office. I never understood them before – they were just like not very pretty wallpaper, but now…..’

‘Well, the charts in Dad’s office are kind of boring,’ she said. ‘They’re all about profits and loss and sales targets and lame stuff like that, but maybe next time you’re there you can ...’

‘We’re going to be in your dad’s office next week,’ I said. ‘Isn’t that when the office family party is on?’

Beth’s face went red and for a second, she didn’t answer. Beth and I are almost like sisters, which is really great – and it means that I know what she’s saying, even when she hasn’t opened her mouth.

‘Beth?’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘About Dad’s office party ...’

Chapter Two

‘Bye, Molly darling,’ said Mum. ‘We’ll be back before ten – but I have my phone if there’s an emergency.’

I could feel stupid tears coming to my eyes. *This* was an emergency. I couldn’t believe Mum and Jim and Beth were all going to Jim’s work party without me.

Beth hugged me. ‘I’m so sorry about this,’ she said. ‘I wish you could come with us, Molly.’

She didn’t look very sorry, though. She almost looked like she was trying not to smile. Now I really wanted to cry. What was going on? Was Beth getting fed up of me? Was she actually glad to have a few hours away from me? She’s supposed to be my very best friend, and ...

‘I’m sorry too,’ said Jim. ‘But for some reason, tickets were very hard to get this year. I was really lucky to even get three.’

I’m not even sure why I was so upset. Jim’s work has parties every month or two and most of them are pretty lame. His boss’s kids are totally weird, and the food always tastes like salty cardboard. Mostly Beth and I beg to go home long before the end.

Maybe it was the thought of being left out that hurt the most. The four of us do everything together these days, and I *so* didn’t like the idea of the others doing something that didn’t include me.

I guess Jim and Beth had to go to the party so he can get promoted or something, but why couldn’t Mum just skip it and stay home with me?

Why couldn’t we let the others go off together, so Mum and I could snuggle up on the couch and watch movies together the way we used to when it was just the two of us?

Why ...?

‘Actually, Jim,’ said Mum then. ‘I’ve just had a thought.’ For a second I felt hopeful – maybe Mum was reading my mind – she’s usually quite good at that. But then she continued. ‘Maybe we should walk to the party instead of driving? It’ll be very hard to find a parking space at this time of the evening.’

Then they had a big talk about whether to drive or walk or get the bus and I felt like screaming at them. *At least you’re going somewhere! I’ll be stuck here all on my own and it so isn’t cool.*

But as they put on their coats, it was almost like they’d forgotten I even existed. Their excited smiles were driving me crazy – couldn’t they at least *pretend* to be sad about leaving me on my own?

‘I’ll be perfectly fine,’ I said. ‘Don’t any of you worry about me for a single second. I’ll probably even have more fun here at home watching TV. You’ll all be so ...’

Mum gave me her best death stare and I knew it was time to stop talking.

Then she kissed me on the forehead, and the three of them set off for their big night out.

* * *

Half an hour later I was sitting on the couch drinking hot chocolate and eating the expensive biscuits Mum had hidden in her ‘top secret’ hiding place in the piano stool. I was just settling down to a movie, when my phone rang.

‘Hi, Mollikins. How’s my precious girl?’

‘Dad!!!’

‘That’s me.’

Dad went to live in Africa years ago. Sometimes I’m still a bit mad at him for leaving, but mostly I really, really miss him. ‘You haven’t called for soooo long,’ I said. ‘I thought you’d forgotten all about your favourite daughter.’

I was in a bad mood, so I was giving him a hard time. We’d had a long chat the day before, so it was kind of weird that he was calling again. I usually only talk to him once a week.

Dad laughed. ‘I haven’t forgotten about my only daughter,’ he said. ‘You know well that we spoke yesterday, Molly. Anyway, how are you tonight?’

‘Mum and Jim and Beth have gone out without me,’ I said. ‘So how do you think I feel? I’m all on my own and I’m so lonely. They’ve gone to a party and they’re going to be gone for hours and hours. I think they’re going for pizza afterwards, and ice cream, and Jim said something about stopping off at the bowling alley too.’

OK, so I might have been exaggerating a small bit, but still, Dad didn’t sound like he cared.

‘Oh, well,’ he said. ‘I suppose you’d better just make the best of it – you should be glad the others are having a nice time.’

Suddenly I felt like crying again. He's my dad. He's supposed to be on my side – no matter what. Why wasn't he agreeing with me about how mean everyone was being? Why was I starting to feel like everyone hated me?

Just then the doorbell rang.

'Hang on a sec, Dad,' I said. 'There's someone at the door.'

'So some randomer at the door is more important than your dear old dad?' he said as I went out into the hall. 'I remember a time when ...'

'Shhh, Dad,' I said. 'I need to see who it is.'

Mum has warned me a million times about opening the door when I'm on my own, so I stood on tiptoes to look through the spy-hole. There was a man standing on the doorstep, and for a second I felt a small bit afraid. I wasn't supposed to answer the door to a stranger – but what if he'd heard my footsteps? What if he knew I was there? What if he was planning to break in?

The man was on the phone, and suddenly he turned around so I could see his face.

He was smiling.

I knew that face.

I knew that smile.

'OMG!' I whispered.

I pulled off the chain, opened the door, and threw myself into his arms.

'Dad!' I said. 'What on earth are you doing here?'

* * *

We hugged for a long time. Whenever Dad tried to step back, I just held on tighter. I'd been waiting ages and ages for that cuddle, and I wasn't letting go that easily.

In the end, when my neck was stiff and my arms were hurting, I pulled away.

'Dad,' I said again. 'What are you doing here? How long are you staying? Why didn't you tell me you were coming? Why did ...?'

'Maybe I could come inside so we can talk?' he said.

'Er, I'm not sure about ... you see, Dad, the thing is ... maybe ...'

Now I felt really weird. Once upon a time this was Dad's home, but he didn't live here anymore. He hadn't lived here since I was eight years old. He'd come home from Africa to see me a few times before, but Mum was still mad at him then, so I had to meet him in a hotel, and he never came to the house.

Lots of stuff had changed since the last time I saw Dad. Now Jim lived in this house with Mum and me – and Beth. Now everything was different and I had a whole new life. I love my dad, and sometimes I wished things could be like they used to be, but I don't believe in fairytales anymore. I'm smart enough to know that I can't turn the clock back so Mum and Dad and I can live happily ever after.

And now Dad was standing on the doorstep of his used-to-be home, and things were totally awkward.

What if Mum and Jim came home?

What were they going to say when they saw Dad?

Was there going to be a big fight?

Were the police going to get involved?

No one likes the idea of their parents living thousands of miles away from each other, but I was sort of getting used to it. If Mum or Dad ended up in jail that would be a whole different story.

'Molly?'

'I'm sorry, Dad,' I said. 'This is too hard for me. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do.'

Now he looked really sad. 'This was supposed to be a wonderful surprise for you,' he said. 'I thought you'd be happy to see me.'

'I *am* happy to see you. But you don't get how scary this is for me.'

'Sorry, Mollikins,' he said. 'Maybe we didn't think this out so well.'

'We?' I said, suddenly starting to figure out what was going on. 'Who's we? Who's been thinking stuff out without me? Did Mum and Jim and Beth know?'

Yes,' said Dad. 'They all knew I was coming back, and we thought it would be nice to surprise you.'

‘So I could’ve gone to Jim’s party? That whole story about there not being enough tickets was ...’

‘Yes,’ said Dad. ‘Jim could have easily got you a ticket, but we all thought ...’

So that’s why Mum and Jim and Beth were all grinning like crazy people when they left. I could feel angry tears coming to my eyes. I didn’t care about Jim’s stupid party, but I hate when people do things behind my back.

Dad put his arm around me. ‘I’m sorry, my darling,’ he said. ‘None of this is your fault, but I know that what happened between your mum and me has been hard for you. Maybe I was being selfish when I came up with this idea, but all I wanted was to spend a few special hours with my little girl. After being away for so long, I wanted to have you all to myself. That’s not so bad, is it?’

And I could’ve stayed angry. I could’ve given him a hard time – but it was so totally amazing having my dad back, I forgot about everything else and hugged him again.

‘It’s really great to see you,’ I said. ‘Now you’d better come inside. My hot chocolate’s going cold.’

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