

CYNTHIA LORD

HOME
away from
HOME



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Chapter 1

“GPS says the road is coming up,” I announced from the back seat of the rental car. We’d been traveling for hours, and I could barely sit still now that we were close. “I remember there’s a Dunkin’ right before you turn.”

“It’s okay, Mia,” Mom said. “Scott knows the way. Just put down your phone and enjoy the view.”

If I hadn’t said anything, I was pretty sure Scott would’ve missed the road, though. Mom and I had come to Grandma’s every summer since I was born. But Scott had only been Mom’s boyfriend for a year, and he’d only been to Grandma’s once with us before.

Stone Harbor, Maine, was at the end of a long peninsula, a crooked finger of land pointing out into the ocean. There was only one road to get to there, so no one ever

just passed through—you had to mean to come. Grandma always said she liked it that way. It kept the town small and the neighbors close.

“Too close,” Mom always replied.

But I loved how nothing big ever changed there.

I couldn't wait to do all my usual Maine summer things: put my feet in the (freezing!) ocean, walk to Holbrook's store, look for seals in the harbor and eagles at the Point, do jigsaw puzzles and play games with Grandma—things that might seem small at home but were fun here.

This year I had an extra reason to come, though. Mom and I were moving, and it hurt too much to be home.

“Mom, make sure you don't give away any of my books,” I said, leaning forward between the front seats. “I didn't have time to look through them all.”

“I'll text you a photo of your bookcase when I get home,” Mom said. “You can let me know which ones you want to keep.”

“Okay,” I said, leaning back again. I hoped she'd remember.

When Mom had said she and Scott were moving in together, I had been okay with it because I thought Scott would move in with *us*. I liked Scott well enough. He was

always nice to me, even though I don't think he ever really wanted a kid. He liked plans and for everything to be organized and neat.

But then Mom had said they were buying a new house together and selling ours.

"It'll be a new start," she'd said.

A new start meant leaving something old behind, though. I thought Mom felt like I did. Like our house was a part of us, practically a family member. Not somewhere you just *leave*. Dad had moved right after the divorce, but I never thought Mom and I would.

Ken the Realtor had given Mom a long list of changes to get our house ready to sell. He'd gone room to room, pointing out anything that was too old or too "us," like family photos. "Buyers want to imagine their own things in each room," he'd said. "So the house will show better if you put those away."

When Ken had gotten to my room, he'd said it looked too much like a kid's room. He'd suggested we take down my artwork and posters, repaint my turquoise walls gray, and put most of my clothes, sports gear, and books into storage. "Buyers might want this room to be an office," he had said. "We want them to see the possibilities!"

I did try. I took down my posters and artwork. I emptied my closet and packed my sports gear into boxes.

But when Mom had opened the can of gray paint, I cried. The color looked like nothing.

“This is only so we can sell it,” Mom said gently. “In the new house, you can paint your room any color you want.”

I had nodded, but this room had been mine for my whole life. Painting it for strangers felt wrong, like a big gray eraser wiping me away.

That night Mom had called Grandma and asked if I could come to Maine by myself that year while she and Scott made the rest of Ken the Realtor’s changes.

As Scott turned the car onto the road to Stone Harbor, I felt my worries unwind a little. Now every salt marsh and field felt familiar, like I belonged here and was coming home again. Grandma called her house my “home away from home,” even though Maine was a plane ride away from our house in Ohio.

We passed the field where the goats always joined us for a walk along their side of the fence. And the place where Grandma once coaxed a huge snapping turtle across the road so he didn’t get squished.

“Here’s where Dad taught me to ride my bike!” I said as we passed the cemetery. “Remember, Mom? I rode up and down the pathways, but then I scratched my leg on a gravestone.” I laughed. “Dad carried me, and you rode my little bike back to Grandma’s.”

“I do remember,” she said.

“Mia learned to ride a bike *in a cemetery?*” Scott asked Mom.

She shrugged. “There isn’t a park here. We thought the cemetery was safer than riding in the road. Looking back, it was a bad idea.”

My smile faded. “It was just a scratch,” I mumbled.

I liked remembering that day. Riding around the gravestones, Dad carrying me, Mom riding my bike. I thought she’d laugh, too. But that was the last year Dad came to Maine with us. He and Mom had an argument and he left early. I didn’t like remembering that, but most happy memories of that summer led to hard ones eventually.

Mom turned to look at me in the back seat. “I wish we could stay, Mia,” she said. “Are you sure you’ll be okay here by yourself? A month is a long time.”

“Of course I’ll be okay. I’m eleven!” I said, rolling my

eyes. “And I won’t be by myself. I’ll be with Grandma.”

Mom sighed. “That’s what I’m worried about. Keep her out of trouble, all right?”

I grinned. “I’ll try.”

Being at Grandma’s was different from being at home. Grandma let me do things that Mom didn’t. I could read books in bed way past bedtime, eat junk food, and walk around town by myself.

Grandma didn’t like to plan ahead, so I didn’t have a schedule at her house. Grandma just got up in the morning, looked outside at the weather, and decided what to do. One day she’d said it was a good day to look for moose. So we drove hours to find one. Mom had said we were lost, but Grandma said, “We’ll figure it out as we go.”

And we did.

As Scott turned the corner, I leaned forward again. “That’s Grandma’s mailbox!” I said. “The white one with the dog bowl on the ground.”

Grandma didn’t even have a dog. She put that bowl of water out for people walking their dogs. Grandma was the only adult I knew who loved animals as much as I did.

Her house looked like many old farmhouses, white with a bay window and a porch with rocking chairs. But

instead of painting the doors, shutters, and rocking chairs gray or green, Grandma painted hers bright lemon yellow.

Waving to us from the porch, Grandma looked like she always did in the summer: knee-length shorts streaked with garden dirt, a floppy T-shirt, sandals, and a wide-brimmed straw hat.

Scott pulled into the driveway, and I grabbed my suitcase off the seat beside me before he even stopped the car.

“Welcome home away from home!” Grandma said as I ran up the steps. She wrapped me in a giant hug. “You’re finally here!”

“We aren’t late, are we?” I heard Scott ask Mom behind me. “The plane was on time, and we didn’t stop anywhere.”

But I knew what Grandma meant, because I felt the same way.

I was finally here.

Mom gave Grandma a big hug, too. “There’s another suitcase in the trunk,” she said. “I think Mia brought enough stuff to stay all summer!”

“I wish!” Grandma said. Then while Mom helped Scott get the rest of my luggage, she leaned in so only I could hear. “Look for a secret in your top dresser drawer.”

I grinned. “I’ll be right back!”

Inside the house, the familiar smell of old wood and damp salt air comforted me. Looking around the kitchen, I was relieved that nothing big had changed.

I didn’t need to ask where to find the scissors or which drawer to open for a spoon or which cupboard held juice glasses. I already knew, just as I knew Grandma would have vanilla ice cream in the freezer. Vanilla was my favorite when I was in kindergarten, and I’d never told Grandma that I liked chocolate chip better now. While I was in Maine, vanilla was still my favorite.

I peeked inside each room I passed. The living room couch reminded me of books Grandma and I’d read together there. The downstairs bathroom was where I had once hid a bucket of sea snails to bring home as pets—until Mom and Dad found them and made me put them back in the ocean. Grandma’s bedroom filled me with a cozy, safe feeling, because she let me sleep with her during thunderstorms.

Upstairs, my room was just as I remembered—except for the jar of purple irises on the nightstand and the stack of clean towels on my bed.

Through the window, I could hear gulls calling and

see all the way over barn weathervanes and house rooftops to the harbor.

I set down my suitcase and opened the top dresser drawer. Inside was a family-sized package of M&M'S.

Grandma knew Mom wouldn't approve, so it was our secret. I pulled out my phone and took a photo of the candy to remember it forever. Then I took photos of my room.

I wished I'd thought to do that back in Ohio before we made changes to my room and started packing. It was too late now, though. It all looked different.

As I came back down the stairs, I heard Mom in the kitchen.

"I suppose we have time for a short walk," she said to Grandma. "I would like to see downtown before we leave."

"That'll take about two minutes," I joked. Stone Harbor didn't have much of a downtown.

Grandma looked over at me and winked. "Did you find everything in your room?"

I winked back. "Yes, thank you. It was very *sweet* of you."

Following them down the front steps, I felt lighter. The

sun was warm on my hair, and the salt air tasted sharper than the air at home.

Everything was just the way I hoped it would be at Grandma's. Cozy and familiar, with only fun little surprises, like finding treats in my top dresser drawer.

Not big, hard surprises, like finding out things had changed without me. I'd had enough of those surprises to last me a lifetime.

But one problem with surprises is that they're sneaky. You never know what kind is coming next.