

Excerpt – *The Way Back Home*

I

Mom's running around like a maniac, trying to make our living room look normal. Good luck with that. You can hang Walmart landscapes where the hairdo pictures go, drape nylon sheets over the dryers, and cover the sinks with trays of pretzels, but a hairdressing salon is a hairdressing salon.

Monday to Saturday, Mom's 'gals' – 'Don't call them clients!' – gossip around the dinette set or watch TV from the dryer chairs. But today is Sunday and we're getting ready for company, which means I'm helping Dad drag the shag carpet up from his insurance office in the basement. It lives there 'cause 'Try vacuuming hair off shag all day.'

The carpet stinks worse than my principal's armpits. I'm not sure if it's from the damp concrete or Dad's sweaty feet; he takes off his shoes during panic attacks. Thank God for the fumes from Mom's rinse-sets, sprays and peppermint foot scrubs.

I lay out the carpet while Dad gets the Hide-a-Bed from the spare room so we can pretend we have a sofa. Mom's at the sink mirrors, too busy fussing with her wig to notice. She's developed 'alopecia' which is this thing where your hair falls out. Seeing as she's a hairdresser, my English teacher would call that irony. Me, I call it karma.

'Is my wig okay?'

'It's fine. People can hardly tell.'

'But they *can* tell?'

'Only if they're looking.'

Mom glares. 'You!'

'So when are we getting Granny?'

'Granny's not coming,' Dad says, wheeling in the Hide-a-Bed.

'But she's always here, Sunday dinner.'

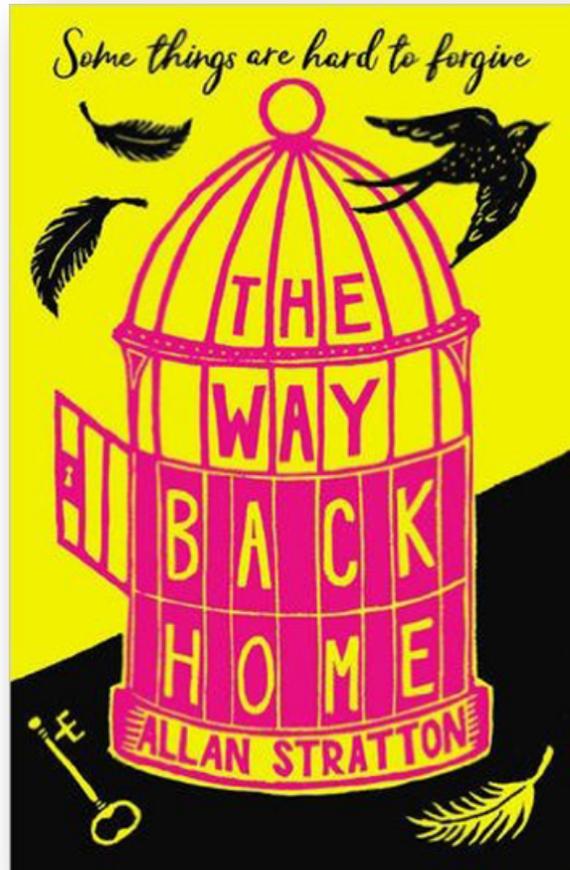
He squeezes it between the dryers. 'Tonight's special. We don't want her upsetting Uncle Chad and Aunt Jess.'

'Granny's not welcome because of *them*?'

Mom tugs at the back of her wig. 'She'd be in that dirty plaid dress and black sweater. Lord knows how many times I've tried to wash them.'

'If you're saying Granny stinks, she doesn't. Old people don't sweat.'

'It's not only that,' Dad says. 'Who knows what she'd say?'



'The truth. Granny says what she thinks.'

'No, she *doesn't* think. That's the problem.' Dad fans a fashion magazine under his armpits.

'Enough about your granny,' Mom says. 'Get dressed.'

'I'm hardly naked.'

'Your cousin won't be wearing jeans. If you'd kept your church clothes on, there wouldn't be a problem.'

'Except I'd be dead. Who even *has* to go to church in high school?'

'Quit dawdling,' Dad says.

'Dawdling? I'm hardly three.'

'Then stop acting like it.'

Talk to my butt. I stomp to my room.

'What's gotten into her lately?' he asks Mom as if I'm deaf. 'Is it a phase?'

'Yeah. My *life* is a phase,' I toss over my shoulder and slam the door behind me. Last summer, they took my phone and grounded me for stuff I didn't even do. Now they're on about Granny all the time. And they wonder why I'm mad?

Tonight's going to be brutal. If Granny were here, we'd play footsie under the table when we were bored and try not to laugh. Without her, how will I cope? I give her a call. 'Hi, Granny.'

'Pumpkin! I was just thinking about you.'

'I was thinking about you, too. Sorry I won't be seeing you tonight.'

'You were going to see me?'

'Yeah, but I can't now 'cause of Mom and Dad. But I'll drop by tomorrow like always.'

'Good. I'll save you a seat on the glider.'

I smile. 'Love you, Granny.'

'Love you, too, sweetheart.'

We hang up and for a second I feel happy. Then I open my closet. Sigh.

I text my cousin Madi: 'What you wearing?'

She doesn't answer. She's probably texting a million friends about the cool party last night I wasn't invited to. I hope her thumbs fall off.

I put on this stupid Junior Miss outfit Mom got me. It makes me look like I'm in kindergarten only taller. At least it's not one of Madi's. Everyone at school knows I wear her hand-me-downs, especially when she says stuff like, 'Was I ever that flat?'

Madi's my best friend except I hate her. When we were little, she decided what toys I could play with. Now she decides who I can have as friends, which is nobody except the cool kids at her table in the caf. And they're not even friends. They don't invite me to their parties and I have to laugh along when Madi throws shade about my hand-me-downs and where I live.

What kind of loser puts up with that?

A loser like me, that's who. I'm so like my parents it makes me puke. 'Cause for the record, Uncle Chad and Aunt Jess coming here isn't 'special'. It's *unbelievable*, as in seeing Martians at Burger King unbelievable. My parents pretend it's 'cause Uncle Chad's so busy with his tractor dealership and Aunt Jess with her social committees. But the real reason is we live in a one-storey aluminum box near the highway and they live where the houses are two-storey brick and the streets have sidewalks.

I mean, Aunt Jess doesn't even drop by for Mom to do her hair. She and Madi go to Sylvie's over in Woodstock 'cause, 'Sylvie isn't a hairdresser: she's a stylist'. Also, she was born in Montreal and has this 'Je ne sais quoi', which is about all the French Aunt Jess knows.

Is Mom calling me?

'Zoe, for the last time, get out here. They're almost at the steps.'

I take my place at the door, five steps back from my parents. Dad's changed into the special herringbone suit he wears when he's asked to do the scripture reading. He pats the jacket pocket where he keeps Grampa's lucky watch.

The Mackenzies knock. Mom counts to ten before opening the door, so they won't know she's been hovering at the window.

'Jess, Chad, Madi!' Mom says, like this is a pleasant surprise.

Apparently the Mackenzies didn't get the memo about tonight being special. They're wearing what Aunt Jess calls 'leisure attire'. Oh yeah, and Madi's in jeans. Designer, but still. She takes one look at my Junior Miss outfit and her eyes go, *Please tell me I never wore that. Ever.*

Mom hugs Aunt Jess like she's her long-lost sister, which is sort of true.

'You didn't need to go to all this trouble,' Aunt Jess says, glancing at the nylon sheets on the hair dryers.

'No trouble,' Mom says, as if Aunt Jess meant it.

'Oh, and what have you done with your hair?'

Mom blushes. 'Just a little this and that.'

Uncle Chad hands Dad a bottle of wine. 'A little something for dinner.' By which he means *their* dinner, since my family doesn't drink. Except for me: apparently I'm this raging alcoholic for sneaking half a beer at Madi's two years ago. Which She Gave Me.

All the same, Dad takes it 'cause, hey, it's Uncle Chad and Aunt Jess. Mom offers them seats on the Hide-a-Bed; she and Dad sit on the sink chairs. This is when Madi and I used to go outside, only since high school she's allergic to being seen at our place – which, okay, so am I. Instead we go to my bedroom.

Madi closes the door and gives me a look. 'You're not going to get the money.'

2

I make a face: *Money? Hunh?*

Madi sighs like I'm simple. 'So your family can buy the old Tip Top Tailors? So your mom can move her salon to Main Street? That's why we're here. You know that, right?'

'Yeah.' I totally don't.

Madi rolls her eyes up into her head. I hope they stay there. 'You are *such* a bad liar. So okay: your mom called my mom about us coming to dinner, and my mom said, "How about a restaurant?" 'Cause eating here? Really? But your mom said no, it had to be private, so she and your dad could ask *my* dad about a loan; and my mom was too embarrassed to say, "What, are you *kidding?*"'

Am I hearing this?

'Anyway,' Madi goes, 'my dad tells Mom, "If your dumb-ass sister and her idiot husband can't get a bank loan, they should put his mother in the county nursing home, move into her place, and sell their dump for cash."'

'Your father wants to put Granny Bird in Greenview Haven?'

'Well, she's hardly normal. Mom says she's demented.'

'Aunt Jess said that in front of you?'

'It's hardly a secret. Your grandmother's a garbage picker.'

'She is not. Granny collects things other people don't want.'

'Yeah. It's called garbage.'

'Quit it. There's nothing wrong with her.'

'To you, maybe. But ask our moms.'

'As if they're something special.'

'Well, *mine* is.'

'Only 'cause she married Uncle Chad. Granny's way more special than her.'

'Oh, she's special all right. Mom's so humiliated: "Why did Carrie have to marry into the Birds? If only she hadn't gotten in trouble." See, that's the difference between us. My parents wanted me.'

'So did mine.'

'Maybe that's what they tell you, but Mom knows different.' Madi checks her nails.

'Speaking of being unwanted, I was trying to find a nice way to say this, but there is no nice way, so I'm just going to say it: Stop talking to me at school, stop sitting at my table, and don't visit my locker. Okay?'

I feel seasick. 'Madi?'

'Sorry if that sounds harsh, but everyone thinks you're a joke. Especially Katie and Caitlyn.'

'Katie and Caitlyn? They were nothing before they got tits.'

'Excuse! Me!' Madi says. 'They look up to me. So stay away.'

'But we go all the way back to when we were little.'

'Don't remind me.'

Why am I pleading? Stop it. Stop! 'And what about last summer when your cousin Danny came to visit from Saskatoon? Who hid your condoms? Who hid your hash? Me. In my old Barbie's Dream House box, right where you told me. And when Mom and Dad found them, who got yelled at and grounded and lost her phone for two months? And I didn't tell. Ever.'

'So what if you had? I'd have said you were lying and you'd have been in *more* trouble. You know it, too. Remember when we were on playdates and I'd pretend you hit me and your mom made you sit in the corner? Too funny.'

'You're so unfair. '

'It is what it is.'

'You only say that 'cause your dad says it and you think it sounds adult. Well, all it sounds like is, you're a big suckhole who thinks I should eat your shit.'

Madi smiles like she's Aunt Jess. 'You're so immature. Speaking of which, Ricky Saunders is totally out of your league, so quit dreaming.'

'Who said I'm into Ricky Saunders?'

'Come on. The way you look at him over at the jocks' table and drool when he comes by my locker with Dylan? Dylan's my boyfriend, you know: it's embarrassing. Gross.' She sits on my bed, pulls out her phone and texts.

'Get off my bed, Suckhole.'

Suckhole giggles. Apparently, some friend has said something hilarious. 'Yeah, I told her,' she texts back.

'You think you can laugh about me in my own room?' I grab for her phone.

'Stay back or I scream.'

'Dinner,' Mom calls from down the hall.

We squish round the dinette set. Uncle Chad has a beer gut and Aunt Jess is 'well-upholstered' so it's hard to move my elbows. Dad says grace. I want to scream.

For the next half-hour, Madi's halo is so big I'm surprised her head doesn't cave in. She sits up straight like I'm supposed to, says please and thank you, and even eats her turnip. Meanwhile, Uncle Chad and Aunt Jess make small talk about his tractors and her running the Fall Fair Committee.

Mom and Dad don't say anything. They just nod like zombies on happy pills. I'll bet Uncle Chad's told them about the loan. After dessert, he pushes back his chair and pats his belly like it's a baby.

'That was some meal, Carrie.'

'Yes, it was just lovely, just lovely,' Aunt Jess says and glances at her watch. 'Why, look at the time.'

It's not even eight o'clock, but who wants to hang around a funeral? We head to the door. Aunt Jess is all, 'We really must do this more often,' and Mom and Dad are all, 'You betcha,' only it looks like they're trying not to vomit.

Uncle Chad squeezes Dad's shoulder. 'It is what it is.'

'Oh well, we'll find a way,' Dad says with his goofy shrug. 'Where there's a will there's a way, right?'

Uncle Chad shoots him a look like he's terminal. 'That's what they say.'

The door closes.

Mom pulls a Kleenex out of her sleeve. Dad takes off his shoes.

I put my hands on my hips. 'So when were you going to tell me?'

Mom daubs her eyes. 'What?'

'About Tip Top Tailors. About moving the salon. I mean, excuse me, aren't I part of the family?'

'You eavesdropped?' Mom says.

'As a matter of fact, Madi told me. She also said Granny's demented, Dad's an idiot and you're a dumb ass.'

'How dare you talk to us like that?'

'I'm quoting.'

'Don't tell tales about your cousin,' Dad says. 'Madi's well behaved.'

'Like Satan is well behaved.'

'Go to your room.'

'Not before you tell me what's going to happen to Granny.'

Dad squeezes his toes. 'Nothing's going to happen to Granny.'

'It better not.' I go to my room all tough, but inside I can hardly breathe.

Next day at school in the halls, Suckhole sails by with her BFFs, Katie and Caitlyn, aka the Suckhole-ettes. I picture them chased through the woods by psychos with chainsaws. I pass Ricky Saunders. We never talk 'cause he's in grade eleven and cool, but he always smiles at me. I used to pretend it meant something. Today I wonder if he knows about my crush and thinks it's funny. I look away.

At lunch, I stare straight ahead as I walk through the cafeteria. I pass Suckhole's table: they giggle. I act like I don't notice.

Is the whole caf staring me? What are they thinking? What are they saying?

I try to walk normal till I get to a table at the back. Emily Watkins is picking her nose and sticking it under her chair. 'What are you doing here?' she says like I'm lost.

'Eating. At least I was.'

Across the table, Eric, the school drug store, is drumming his knapsack: he's so stoned that when teachers call his name he thinks it's a trick question.

People are laughing. *Is it about me?* My chest and fingers prickle. I get up, stick out my chin like I don't care, toss my lunch in the garbage and hide in the girls' bathroom. The bell rings. I can't go to class. I run outside, grab my bike and head to Granny's.

Granny lives in a big, yellow-brick two-storey on a quarter-acre lot, with a widow's walk, a wrap-around verandah, and most of its shutters. Mom says it looks like a hobo house. Well, it's not Granny's fault that Dad's so clumsy. When he patched the roof, the shingles didn't match and tar went everywhere. When he painted the window frames, drips went over the brick. And he says the yard's too big to mow and water every week, so no surprise, it looks like crap.

If my parents hired people, things would be okay, only, 'We don't have the money'. Fine, then don't complain. At least Granny doesn't live in a cheesy beauty salon. Her place even has a name: the Bird House. Not because of the bird baths and feeders either. No, 'cause it's been in the Bird family since the 1920s. Granny and Grampa moved back to take care of my great-grandfather when Dad was seven.

I drop my bike inside the gate. Granny's on the verandah glider in her plaid dress and bulky black sweater. It's kind of her uniform, along with the red leather purse slung over her shoulder so she won't forget where she put it. It has her wallet, car keys, Kleenex, surprises, and a phone my parents got her in case she falls and can't get up.

Granny's eyes light up: 'Zoe! What's the magic word?'

I'm too old for this but it makes her happy. 'Rhubarb.'

'Pie!' Granny hugs me. 'Want to go inside?'

'Why? Don't you like it here?'

It's not Granny's fault, but her place smells of old person. On good days, the air is heavy-sweet, like the inside of a cookie jar. On other days, well, Granny doesn't clear the mousetraps. Dad replaces them when he comes by once a week with any mail he's picked up at Canada Post, which is basically nothing.

We rock together on the glider. When I was little, I'd crawl underneath and count the earwigs curled up in the screw holes.

'So,' Granny says, 'what does my little bird Bird have to tell me today?'

I want to make up fun stuff, but out of nowhere my head's on her shoulder and I'm going on about how Madi kicked me off her cafeteria table – where, okay, maybe I don't belong, but sitting there was the only thing halfway cool about me.

'You don't need Madi,' Granny says. 'Make other friends.'

'Who'd want me?'

'Anyone with a brain.'

'Why?' I sniffle.

'Because you're good, and kind, and loyal, and you have the biggest heart in the world.'

'You're just saying that.'

'Are you calling your granny a liar? Who else has a grandchild visit them every day? So you forget that little Madi toad. Those Mackenzies always think they're better than everyone. Well, want to know why her great-uncle had a closed casket? He passed out on the railroad tracks. Ended up in five pieces. They never did find the feet.'

I've heard that story a million times, but it always makes me laugh. 'What do you think happened to them?'

'I think a couple of dogs had a chew and died of foot poisoning.'

'Or Uncle Chad hid them in the freezer for a souvenir.'

'Or your aunt Jess made them into soup.'

'Or somebody kicked them up Madi's ass.'

Granny slaps her leg. 'Now you're talking.'

Granny and I look out at her yard. I love all the bird baths, especially after it rains and the robins and jays splash around. I also love the baby carriages and my old Tonka truck: she used to grow flowers in them, so really they're more like planters. Then there's the mannequin with the shower cap lounging in the wheelbarrow – we call him Fred – and the windmill from the old miniature golf club. Everything has a story, even the bird nests lining her verandah.

Today, there's something new. 'Where did that tricycle come from?'

Granny frowns. 'That's a mystery. What's your theory, Detective Bird?'

'Some kid left it?'

'I wonder where he went?'

'Maybe he was kidnapped in an ice-cream truck,' I wink. 'Let's check the Tastee Freeze. I'll bet we'll find him in a hot fudge sundae.'

Granny laughs, pats my knee and we get into her old Corolla. Her door won't shut tight 'cause it's dented in. Granny ties the front and rear window frames together with a dog collar.

'What happened to the door, Granny?'

'Some fellow must've backed into me in the parking lot.'

We drive off, ignoring the dinging sound. Granny's careful. She goes slow and when we get near parked cars, she steers into the middle of the road. Some guy honks behind us. Granny pulls to the curb and lets him pass. 'People today.' Her lips move like she's concentrating on a grocery list.

'Granny?'

She shushes me with her hand. 'I'm thinking . . . We're going somewhere.'

'Yes. To the Tastee Freeze.'

'Well, of *course* to the Tastee Freeze.' She taps her finger on the wheel.

'Two streets up, to the left?'

'I know that. Your granny's just a little distracted is all.'

At the Tastee Freeze, Granny stays in the car while I order our sundaes. She watches me eat, then gives me hers. 'We should get going.'

'We just got here.'

'You can't trust people these days. When you're gone, they clean you out.'

As we pull into her drive, I think about how I imagine murderers in the closets when I come home and Mom and Dad are away. 'Want me to help search your place to make sure nobody's snuck in?'

'God bless you.'

Granny's place is cluttered like my bedroom, only with crusty antiques and things she keeps 'just because'. She checks the main floor while I do upstairs, starting with her bedroom. Not to be mean, but she *should* wash her sheets. Still, if you can't live like you want when you're old, when can you?

For fun, I look in her closets, armoires, and under the bed where she keeps scrapbooks and family photo albums. Her night table is full of framed pictures, too: of Grampa, me, Mom and Dad, and Uncle Teddy when he was little.

Uncle Teddy was twelve years older than Dad. He died before Granny and Grampa moved here to look after great-grandpa. Once, I asked Granny what happened. She teared up and left the room. Dad says to leave it alone, so it must have been awful, like maybe he killed himself? Anyway, I think he was her favourite 'cause the dust on his picture is smudged from her picking it up.

'All clear downstairs,' Granny calls.

'All clear up here,' I call back.

Outside, Granny leans against the verandah railing. 'When you're old, they want you gone.'

'I don't, Granny.'

'I know, Pumpkin.' She gives me a hug. I wish she'd never let go.