

A
Home for
Molly

For Mia

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Chapter One



Anya lay on her front in the sand, trying to build a tower of pebbles. It was quite tricky because she was holding a cheese sandwich, so she only had one hand free for building. She was a bit full for another sandwich really, but as they were on holiday her mum had let her put ketchup in them so she didn't want to waste it.

“Anya, did you want a drink?” Mum called over from the picnic blanket.

“And some cake?”

“In a minute,” Anya murmured, balancing a large black stone on top of her tower and looking at it hopefully. It wobbled for a second or two – and then the whole thing collapsed. Anya sighed, but she didn’t mind that much. It was the fifth time she’d built it and it always fell down in the end. This tower had been higher than any of the others. She got up and wandered back over to the picnic blanket, where her mum and dad were trying to persuade her little sister, Jessie, that she was too small for cake. Jessie was only nine months old, but she was convinced that everybody else’s food was nicer than hers. Anya

thought she was probably right – some of the meals in the baby recipe book sounded very odd. Who would want to eat Tasty Lentil Surprise?

Anya took her drink and a slice of cake and moved over to the edge of the blanket so that Jessie couldn’t see her. Otherwise it would just be mean.



The beach was really busy today. Anya looked around at all the other families, who were mostly eating their picnics, too. Anya's family had only come to the beach for a quick visit the day before, when they'd first arrived in Saltmere. There had been unpacking to do and Jessie had been a bit tired after the long car journey. This was their first proper beach day. Anya hadn't felt lonely yesterday – it hadn't been the real start of their holiday. But today... She couldn't help wishing that she had someone else to build sandcastles with – or make mermaid statues, like those three girls over by the steps up to the promenade. Or even swim – there was a whole big family group standing

by the edge of the water now, the children squeaking at the coldness of the waves washing over their toes.

“Oh, *look...*” Anya whispered, as the family's dog splashed through the water, too. She darted into the waves and then shook herself all over the children, making them squeal.

“They're so lucky,” Anya murmured to herself. The dog was gorgeous, even when she was wet. Anya wasn't really sure it was a girl dog, of course, but the dog was so pretty – golden-brown and curly all over, with great fluffy ears and a sort of topknot of blonde fur. The seawater had turned her curly fur into coiling tendrils all over. She wasn't very big, and Anya wondered if she was still a puppy.

She watched the family splashing with each other and playing with the dog while she tried to build her tower of stones again. She couldn't help feeling a bit jealous. There was an older boy, a girl about her age and a littler girl as well. They were all laughing and flicking water at each other.



Anya sighed and looked round at Mum and Dad and Jessie. Her little sister was cute and Anya adored her – most of the time. But it was going to be quite a while before Jessie would be big enough to play in the sea with her.

And the other family had a gorgeous fluffy puppy, too! Anya loved dogs and she really wished they could have one of their own. Dad had said maybe – when Jessie was bigger. He'd had a dog when he was Anya's age and he loved them, too. But he said he didn't think a dog was a great idea with Jessie being so tiny – and grabby. Even the nicest dog would get grumpy if Jessie pulled at its ears, he pointed out, and Anya had to admit that he was right. Jessie was always

pulling her hair and it hurt, even though Jessie didn't mean it to.

The children were coming out of the sea now, heading back to their spot further along the beach by the steps. Anya could see their mum and dad waving. The fluffy little golden dog was racing along the beach after them, stopping to sniff here and there. Anya giggled as she saw the puppy gobble down a bit of sandwich that someone had dropped and then sniff at a pile of seaweed. She looked like she might be about to eat that, too, and Anya wondered if she ought to tell the children. Seaweed wasn't the sort of thing that would be good for a dog to eat. Anya frowned disapprovingly as they hurried back to their parents

along the beach. How could they not notice that their dog had been about to eat something disgusting? She couldn't help thinking that if *she* had such a lovely dog, she would take better care of it than that.

But then the golden puppy stopped nibbling at the seaweed and raced after the children, flinging herself at their legs and yapping. The older girl was just walking past Anya and her tower of stones, and the little dog was so excited that she knocked it over with her wagging tail.



“Oh! I’m really sorry!” the girl said, looking down in horror at the pile. “I didn’t mean to knock it over.”

“It’s OK! It was an accident. The dog knocked it with her tail,” Anya said, a little shyly. “She’s beautiful.”

“She is, isn’t she?” the other girl agreed, watching as the puppy chased off after her little sister. “She’s called Molly. Do you want me to help you build your tower again? I was looking at it as we came past – it was really tall! I bet I couldn’t do that, but I could pass you the stones or something?”

Anya smiled at her. “Don’t worry. I was only building it because I was a bit bored. It falls down every time. I must have built about seventeen towers by now.”

“You’re bored?” The girl looked surprised. She glanced around the beach, as though she couldn’t see how anyone could be bored in such a nice place.

“My dad says he’ll come in the sea with me later,” Anya explained. “But right now he’s looking after my baby sister and giving my mum a break. And he says it’s not a great idea to go in the sea on my own. I suppose I could paddle, but…” She shrugged. “You’re so lucky having your brother and sister to play with.”

The other girl sat down next to Anya and let out a huffy sigh. “You think? Didn’t you see Zach tip me up into that wave? Having a big brother is *awful*.” She sniffed. “Little sisters

are a bit better, but Lily always wants to do everything I'm doing, which is a real pain sometimes." She grinned at Anya and nodded over at Jessie. "You'll find out! But I suppose I am quite lucky really. It wouldn't be as much fun here without them to do things with." She glanced back at Anya. "You could come and build sandcastles with us, if you like? My mum says the tide's going to be high in an hour, so if we want to get the water to go round the castle, now's the time to build it. Would your mum and dad let you?"

Anya nodded. "I'm sure they would. I'll ask. Um, thanks," she added, turning red. "That's really nice of you."

"I'm Rachel," the girl said, jumping up. "I'll come with you. Then I can

show your mum and dad where all our stuff is. We were going to build our castle just over there."

Anya's mum was delighted that she'd found someone to play with.

"Of course you can," she said, smiling at Rachel. "It's very kind of you to let Anya join in. Are you the same age as Anya? Nine?"

"I'm almost ten," Rachel said. "And my brother Zach is twelve and Lily's seven. They're both over there." She pointed across the beach. "Oh, they've started. We'd better go, or Zach will build it all wrong."

Anya picked up her spade and followed Rachel over to her brother and sister. Zach was already digging enthusiastically, making a channel for

the sea to flow into the moat, and Lily was collecting stones and seashells to decorate the castle. Molly was helping her, sniffing at the piles of seaweed again and rooting shells out for her to pick up.



Anya and Rachel started to build the main part of the castle, digging out a deep moat and piling the sand into the middle to make the fort. Every so often they had to stop and shoo away Lily, who kept trying to stand on the mound of sand.

“I’m bigger than you!” she sang to Rachel.

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Yes, Lily, *because you’re standing on a big pile of sand!*”

Anya giggled and Rachel shrugged at her. “Just you wait,” she muttered, elbowing Anya in a friendly sort of way. “Oh, look, look! The water’s starting to come in!”

A creamy yellow foam was creeping slowly down Zach’s channel and the

girls danced up and down excitedly, waiting for it to get right into the moat.

“This wave! It’s going to be this one!” Anya yelped. “Look! There it is! Oh no...”

Molly had been watching the water most suspiciously, glaring at it as it inched along. Now she leaped into the moat and stood there barking at it, sand showering down from the castle all over her golden coat.

“You’re going to need a bath tonight,” Anya giggled. “Come on! Come on!” She coaxed the little dog out and sat down next to her, patting her gently as they watched the water spread all around the moat. Rachel crouched next to them and stroked Molly’s ears.

“Yay, look, it’s meeting in the middle!” Rachel squealed, jumping up and nearly falling in the moat herself, before sitting back down again.

Anya gave the surprised puppy a hug and then laughed as Molly licked her across the nose. “I’m so glad you knocked down my tower,” she whispered in Molly’s curly ear.

