

**FROZEN IN TIME**  
**JAHNNA N. MALCOLM**  
**LIBRA**

*(September 24 to October 22)*

*Libra likes to think that everything she touches will be beautiful, balanced and fair. She cannot make up her mind because she weighs up all the elements. She is fair of face, a good thinker, radiant in expression, an optimist against all odds and has a dreamy quality about her. Libra's ideal of love is storybook love; Romeo and Juliet, Orpheus and Eurydice, Tristan and Isolde. In every Libra there's a dream waiting to come true.*

Lily creates a dream world through her painting - shutting out the harsh reality of New York life. But when someone she loves is murdered, Lily has to come to terms with the real world. Or does she?



**FROZEN**  
**IN TIME**  
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CHAPTER ONE

*LIBRA (September 24 - October 22) While others are on vacation, you have strong support for the progress of your career. You will attract people who are thrown together with you by destiny, fate, and circumstance.*

"**B**eat it!" a boy dressed all in black bellowed at Lily Martinez. "You're gonna get yourself hurt!"

"But I live on the next block." Lily clutched the canvas bag holding her art work to her chest and tried to move round the boy.

"Find some other way home!" he ordered, blocking her way.

"No. Now you get out of my way," Lily shot back. The heat was making her cranky. The heat, and New York City. Too crowded, too dirty, and filled with angry teenagers like this one, getting in your face.

The boy grabbed her arm and stared hard into her eyes. His dark eyes were filled with fear. A fear so strong that it sent a shock wave through Lily. "Oh!" she gasped.

"Fine!" he shouted, releasing her arm. "Stay here and die!"

He turned and ran so fast that his cap flew off his head. He didn't stop to get it.

An instant later the old warehouse in the middle of the block exploded. The deafening roar blew the windows out, sending shards of glass in every direction. Pieces of wood, brick, and metal fell in deadly rain on the street.

The blast knocked Lily's slender body to the ground. Her sketchbook and art supplies went flying. Lily sheltered her head from the falling glass and brick with her arms. She opened her mouth to shout for help, but no sound came out.

A second explosion sent a rush of flames through the warehouse. The ground beneath Lily rumbled, and she moaned, "Stop it. Please make it stop."

The surge of heat pouring from the fire was overpowering. Strong enough to singe the dark hair that surrounded her face. She pulled herself into a tight foetal position. *Did a gas pipe rupture? Her mind was racing for answers. A car bomb? A terrorist attack? Am I going to die?*

People fled in panic out of the other buildings on the block. Some were bleeding or limping. Others were helping neighbours carry belongings into the street. Everyone was screaming.

"Call 911!"

"Ambulance! Get an ambulance!"

"What happened? Did a plane crash?"

Unable to bear it, Lily covered her eyes and sobbed.

She nearly jumped when she felt someone touch her shoulder. "Are you all right, *mademoiselle?*"

Lily stared into the piercing blue eyes of an old man. He was bearded, unkempt, and looked as if he lived on the street. Yet the old man had a kind smile and a strangely familiar face.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said gently. "Are you hurt?"

"I – I don't think so," Lily stammered. "Just scared."

The old man helped her to her feet and then left.

Lily watched him walk calmly past the burning warehouse and the surrounding chaos. It made for a very strange sight. Pieces of charred timber

were falling all round him. Lily cupped her hands to shout a warning but he disappeared in a cloud of grey smoke.

Suddenly Lily felt pain. Her elbows were bleeding. Her knees, bare under her short black skirt, were bruised and bloody. Her white T-shirt was torn. She touched her curly dark hair. That morning she'd tied it back in a ponytail but the elastic band had broken in the explosion. Now her hair framed her face with a thick black cloud.

"My drawings!" Lily watched her sketches soar away in the spiralling wind caused by the inferno.

Several fire trucks arrived with sirens blaring, and their crews quickly unloaded hoses and equipment. "Stand back!" a firefighter ordered through a bullhorn. "Clear the area! Everybody, clear the area!"

Two police cars screeched to a stop at opposite ends of the block. One officer jumped out of his car and turned traffic back, allowing only paramedics and ambulances to approach the scene.

Hypnotized by shock, Lily watched as the firefighters opened a hydrant. Struggling to control the hose, the crew began to douse the blaze.

"We'll need more help!" she heard a fire captain shout. "Call in more units!"

A few minutes later, vans from local television stations sped past the police barricade. Reporters and video camera operators spilled out and began broadcasting from the scene.

"Better move along now, miss," a police officer told Lily.

Lily stared at the officer as if he were speaking a foreign language. "What?"

He took her gently by the shoulders and turned her round. "Go home before you get hurt."

"But I live over there. On Avenue C, between Fourth and Fifth," she protested. "I was coming home from art class when all of a sudden the building just blew up."

"Did you see what happened?" the officer asked, suddenly interested. "A number of warehouses have been torched round here. Did you see anyone leaving the building?"

Lily remembered the boy in black who'd run away, but for some reason she didn't want to tell the officer. Maybe the boy had nothing to do with the explosion. And he *had* warned her. She shook her head.

"Well, I'll let you through," the officer said, disappointed. "But go straight home. Understand?"

"Don't worry."

It took Lily a couple of steps to find her balance. Her knees ached, she had lost her drawings, but she was determined to get home. Shielding her face from the fire's heat, she made her way round the fire trucks, coiled hoses and jabbering television crews.

She stopped only to look up at the burning warehouse. Its old brick facade was still largely intact but the interior had been gutted by fire. If the neighbourhood pattern held, the owner would take the insurance money, put in luxury loft apartments, and make a fortune. And a few more families would lose their homes.

At the corner, Lily was about to cross the street when something in the gutter caught her eye. It was the baseball cap dropped by the fleeing boy. The cap was soaking wet from the water from the fire hoses.

She picked up the cap and examined it. It was jet black with a winged patch sewn on the crown. They looked like wings belonging to an angel.

She shook the water from the cap, then tucked it in her bag. *With a good washing, this could be a very cool cap. Serves him right.* She smiled.

In front of her tenement, Lily was relieved to find her house keys still in her bag. She opened the heavy front door and let herself in. She walked past the mailboxes and down the hall stained with spray-painted graffiti. The air inside the building was incredibly humid and sour. New York City was in the middle of another terrible heatwave. And no place seemed hotter than the tough neighbourhoods on the Lower East Side.

Lily trudged up the four flights to her family's apartment. Even before reaching the door, she could hear her half-sister Rosa arguing with their mother, Stormy.

"Look what he did to you - to us - last time!" Rosa was screaming. "And now you're letting him come back? I don't believe it!"

"Rosalita, please," Stormy said.

"Don't call me that!" Rosa exploded. "I'm fourteen years old!"

Shaking her head, Lily used her keys to open the deadbolt locks on the apartment door. She tried to sneak into the room she shared with Rosa, but her mother called from the kitchen, "Lily, is that you?"

"Yes, Stormy." *Trapped.*

"Where you been? You were supposed to be home an hour ago." Stormy appeared in the hall wearing a stained housecoat. A few curlers she had forgotten to remove remained in her hair. Her make-up was applied heavily, especially round her eyes.

Lily stared at her mother in disbelief. "Didn't you two hear the explosion?"

"What explosion?" Stormy asked.

"The fire trucks? The sirens?" Lily gestured to her smoke-stained clothes and skinned knees. "Someone blew up a warehouse two blocks away. I was nearly killed."

Stormy moved to peer out of their living room window. "I heard sirens but I didn't hear no explosion."

"That's because you were too busy screaming at me." Rosa was dressed in the same T-shirt she'd worn all week. It had the words "Death Rules" printed in heavy metal style lettering across the back. Her thick dark hair was a rat's nest of tangles. She stood in the centre of the room, her arms folded across her chest, glaring at their mother.

"You're the one doing the screaming," Stormy shot back.

"I can't believe it!" Lily shook her head in amazement. "Only you two could miss the fact that a building was blown to smithereens on the next block. I mean, I thought it was an atomic bomb or something."

Rosa shifted her glare to Lily, her dark eyes flashing with anger. "Stormy's letting Danny move back in."

Lily's mouth worked soundlessly for several seconds. Finally she turned to her mother and whispered, "What?"

Danny was Stormy's third husband. Lily's father had been the first one. Rosa's dad was number two. But Danny was the one they feared.

Stormy tossed her head defiantly. "Danny's a new man. It'll be better this time. You'll see."

"No." Rosa stamped her foot. "I won't let him back in here."

Stormy put one hand to her forehead. "Oh, Rosa, please. I know Danny had problems. I know we used to fight. But that's gonna change." She turned to Lily, her sad brown eyes brimming with tears. "Please give him another chance."

"Lily, don't give in!" Rosa said between clenched teeth. "Remember how he was. What he did to us."

As usual, Lily was torn. She wanted her mother to be happy and her home life peaceful. She was so tired of the constant bickering between Stormy and Rosa. And Stormy was always much happier when there was a man around. But why did it have to be Danny? The least little thing would set him off. Add one too many drinks and he'd be breaking furniture.

Their neighbour Mrs. Velasquez often said that Lily was a true Libra. Always trying to keep the peace. Never making choices that might be considered taking sides.

"Mom, the three of us were getting along fine without Danny," Lily said finally. "Why does he have to come back?"

"A few more years and you girls will be out on your own," Stormy explained as she dug in her housecoat pocket for a tissue.

"I wish I was already on my own," Rosa muttered.

Stormy scowled at Rosa and continued. "You know how I hate to be alone. Danny isn't perfect, but what man is? We had our good times, the four of us. Remember when he took us to Little Italy for pasta? Besides, he'll help pay the rent, which is going up all the time. You know what a seamstress gets these days? Zip. Nada. And you two aren't cheap. I have to feed you, buy you clothes—"

"I'm not listening!" Rosa sang, covering her ears. "Blah blah blah. Same old story."

Lily couldn't blame Rosa for trying to shut out her mother's words. Stormy talked incessantly. It was a bad habit made worse when she was under stress. Her manic blabbering was one reason why Danny had taken off. But right then Rosa was only grating on nerves that were already raw.

"Stop it, Rosa," Lily cried, pulling her sister's hands down to her side.

"If you want to ruin your life, go right ahead!" Rosa screamed at their mother. "But don't drag Lily and me down with you." She ran past Lily into their bedroom, slamming the door with a loud bang. So loud that the neighbours from the floor below pounded on the ceiling with a broomstick.

"All right! All right!" Stormy shouted at the floor. "You made your point!" She turned to Lily and sighed. "This heat is killing me. It's killing everyone."

"Mom," Lily pleaded in a quiet voice, "please reconsider—"

"Lily, you have your art classes," Stormy cut in, sinking on to the couch. "I need something - someone - in my life."

"You have Rosa and me," Lily reminded her.

Stormy looked at Lily and shrugged, sadly. "It's not enough."

Lily had no answer to that. Defeated, she went into her bedroom. Rosa was listening to loud music through a pair of earphones. Her fourteen-year-old face was already hard and mean and she was pounding her foot to the beat against the wall. Rosa didn't care that she was knocking down Lily's drawings and the prints Lily had bought at the Impressionist show at the Metropolitan Museum.

*What I'd give to have my own place. My own world.*

Lily set her canvas bag on her bed. (Hers was the nicely made one; Rosa hadn't changed her sheets since Easter.) She removed the black cap from her bag and tossed it on to the quilted spread.

"Where'd you get that?" Rosa asked, pointing to the cap.

"I found it," Lily said sharply. "What's it to you?"

"You know what it is?" Rosa asked.

"Yeah. It's a baseball cap," Lily said. "You got a problem?"

"The one with a problem is Mom," Rosa snorted. "So don't go barking at me. I was only asking a question."

"Look, you don't help anything by fighting with her," Lily said, peeling her sweaty T-shirt over her head. "All day, every day, you two fight. I hate coming home."

"That makes two of us." Rosa removed her earphones and sat up on the bed. "Look, Lily, do you know about that cap or not?"

"What's the big deal? Lily picked up the cap and looked at it closely. "Someone dropped it on the street before the explosion. He didn't want it, so I took it."

"That's a Lucifer cap."

"These are angel wings. I thought Lucifer was a devil," Lily said, examining the black cap.

"He started out as an angel," Rosa said. "He was sent to hell after trying to take over heaven. Don't you remember anything the nuns taught us at Sacred Heart?"

Lily narrowed her eyes at her sister. "How come you know so much about the Lucifers?"

"Anybody with half a brain knows about them," Rosa continued. "I can't believe you, Lily. Seventeen years old, and you are so dense." Rosa shook her head in disgust.

"So I don't know about a neighbourhood gang's stupid outfit." Lily grabbed a clean T-shirt from her drawer and pulled it over her head. "What's the big deal?"

"Wear that hat on the wrong block and find out," Rosa replied.

Lily frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Lily." Rosa picked up the cap, holding it carefully, as if it were a bomb that could explode at any moment. "This hat could get you killed."

## CHAPTER TWO

*Difficult aspects in your chart lessen your self-confidence. But you deserve recognition, Libra, so when it comes your way, take it.*

"Lily, that's wonderful work," her art instructor Veronica McCarty told her the next morning. "Particularly the way you've used the play of the light to deepen the shading between the model's neck and shoulder."

"Thank you," Lily said quietly. As usual, she was embarrassed by the attention. Not that all of it was as positive as Veronica's. Out of the corner of her eye, Lily could see Phil Boskowski's jealous smirk.

There were ten students in her life drawing class at the Manhattan Institute for Visual Arts and Phil was the most outspoken of them. He wore his blond hair in a plait down the centre of his back and always had a West African embroidered cap perched on his head. He dressed in colourful print shirts and cotton string pants. Everything about him said "artist" - except his work. Lily always felt it lacked heart.

He'd made it clear to her that she was too much of a romanticist. "Life is cruel," Phil had proclaimed at a cafe one day after school. "Filled with harsh angles. Requiring bold strokes. There's no time for soft curves and pastels."

"Art does not have to imitate life," Lily had argued. "If people have beautiful pictures to look at, maybe they can put some of that beauty back into their world."

"Our Lily is a dreamer," Phil had then announced sadly to the rest of their classmates. "She can't handle the real world."

Everyone had laughed but Lily had worried that Phil might be right. She was a dreamer. And she did have trouble dealing with the harsh realities of life in the city. But who didn't?

*Ding.*

A small chime sounded and the young woman who was the class's model shifted positions, draping one arm above her head. Lily sketched furiously. The point of the exercise was to capture the lines, yes, but the essence of the pose lay in the interplay of light and shadows.

"Class, just a few more minutes," their teacher said, "and then we need to let our lovely model leave, and pack up for today."

"That's good," a girl two easels away remarked. "I'm melting."

The Institute - or MIVA as it was known in artists' circles — rented space in a tumbledown factory on West 14th Avenue in the old slaughterhouse district. The building was not air conditioned, and the mid-August heat poured through the large open windows. A few rotating fans did little to cool the sauna-like room. Still, working in a clean T-shirt, khaki shorts and sandals, her black hair pulled back in a ponytail, Lily loved being there.

"You have time for an iced cappuccino after class?" Kit Webster whispered from the next easel.

Kit came from a wealthy family. So wealthy that Kit was able to take a cab from her family's duplex on Central Park West all the way downtown and back from art class every day.

"I wish I did," Lily said. "But I have to get to work."



"Cooking greasy hamburgers in the Village," Kit said, rolling her eyes. "Lily, you should at least be working at a gallery."

"I'd love to work in a gallery," Lily murmured, studying the life drawing she was working on. Something wasn't right. She swiped at the curve of the girl's elbow with her charcoal. "Everybody dreams of working in a gallery."

Kit had already packed up her charcoals. She flipped the cover of her pad shut, and ran a quick brush through her strawberry blonde hair. "My mother is great friends with the person who runs the Hanson-Baker Gallery on West 57th. Why don't I tell Mother to give Dotty a call, and—?"

"Thanks, Kit," Lily cut in. "But I don't think it would work out."

"But, Lily, who knows?" Kit continued eagerly as she tucked her supplies into her large leather portfolio. "You show this gallery owner your own work and maybe she'll start you off in a small group show. Get your name in the newspaper a few times, then someone will offer you your own show, and pretty soon you'll be rich and famous and never talk to me again."

"It sounds perfect." Lily chuckled at her friend's enthusiasm. "But it won't happen." Lily didn't know how to tell Kit that working at a fancy midtown gallery would require more than talent. It would require a wardrobe. A *very expensive, artsy wardrobe*. Something she could never afford. It was hard enough for Lily to buy the T-shirt and pants she needed to work at her restaurant.

"I know. You want to suffer for your art," Kit said, sarcastically. She fanned her hand in front of her face. "I have to get out of this heat before I pass out."

The rest of the students packed up their supplies while the model left to get dressed. Phil, who had been eavesdropping on Lily and Kit's conversation, suddenly appeared at Kit's side. "Did someone mention iced cappuccino?" He struck a pose with his arms outspread. "I'm available."

Kit turned back to Lily. "Sure you can't join us for a quick one? My treat."

"I want to finish this sketch before work," Lily said. "Maybe some other time."

Phil looped his arm through Kit's. "Let her sit here and sweat. What say we cruise down Broadway and see what the ignorant art lovers are buying in SoHo?"

Kit grinned. "Sounds good to me. *Ciao*, Lily!"

Lily watched them leave, thinking they looked like true artists, colourful and flamboyant. She glanced down at her own clothes. *Plain and dreary*. She was happy to stay behind.

Soon, only Lily and her teacher were left in the room. Lily continued to make changes to her drawing.

"Lily, I need to run down to the office for a few minutes," Veronica said. "When I get back, I'm afraid I'll have to kick you out."

"I understand," Lily said without looking up.

With Veronica gone, the only sounds left were the whirl of the rotating fan and the soft scratch-scratch-scratch of Lily's charcoal against the paper. Lily was in heaven.

This summer at MIVA was the first time in her life that she had had a place to go to that was dedicated solely to art. She didn't mind that it took her nearly an hour to walk there in the morning - because she wanted to save the cost of the bus fare. Or that everyone seemed to know that she alone was on a special scholarship for "underprivileged inner-city youth".

*Maybe Kit was right, she thought. Maybe it's stupid to suffer for one's art. But look at Vincent van Gogh. He had a horrible life and went totally mad, but his paintings will live for ever.*

The more her thoughts turned to painters who had unhappy lives - van Gogh, Leonardo da Vinci, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Egon Schiele, the list seemed endless - the more dissatisfied she became with her sketch of the model.

Yes, she had captured the girl's form. The curves of her body, the shape of her flesh, the particulars of her face. But she had failed to communicate her essence - her pride. The way that, even naked, she faced the world with confidence and ease. *How she is everything I'm not.*

Lily began to draw over certain areas and to erase others. The paper was becoming smudged and muddy-looking.

"I hate this!" Lily said out loud.

Pressing too hard, she broke the charcoal. Totally frustrated, she hurled what was left in her hand to the floor where it shattered into a dozen pieces.

"Who are you kidding?" she said, pulling her sketch off the pad and tearing it in half. The sound of the ripping paper felt like a knife slicing through her stomach. "You're no van Gogh, nor anything close!"

She tore the halves in half again - and again - and again - until she was left with nothing but a pile of scrap.

Veronica returned to find Lily crumpled on the floor beside the paper scraps, weeping.

"Lily!" Veronica cried, rushing to her. "Lily, what happened?" She put her arms round Lily and helped her to her feet.

"My life is such a mess," Lily said between sobs. "Why should my art be any different?"

"But, Lily, you're the best student in the class," Veronica said. "In fact, you're one of the best students I've ever worked with."

Lily wiped her eyes, and shrugged.

"You have to give yourself time to grow," Veronica said in a kind voice. "Not only as an artist, but as a woman."

"I know," Lily said. "But sometimes it's just so hard!"

"Listen," Veronica said. "I can't pretend to know what your life is like. I know you have some problems at home."

"That's an understatement," Lily said.

"But your art can help you find some balance in your life. If you let it."

"Balance." Lily chuckled, wiping at her eyes with the back of her charcoal-smudged hand. "The problem for all Libras."

Veronica blinked in surprise. "Oh, are you interested in astrology?"

"Kind of." Lily picked up the bits of broken charcoal from the floor. "I don't know if it applies to everyone but all I know is Libra certainly seems to fit me - the fence sitter. So busy trying to keep peace, seeing both sides to every issue - I can never make a decision."

"Don't forget that Librans also have the soul of an artist," Veronica said. "They love the harmony of sound, colour and poetry. Venus is their ruling planet. So besides being beautiful people, they seek the beauty in the world." She grinned at Lily. "Not bad traits, if you ask me."

Now it was Lily's turn to act surprised. "Then you're a believer?"

Veronica raised an eyebrow. "I believe that all things are possible in this world. Astrology is as good a place to start as any in our quest for self-discovery."

"So what is your sign?"

"I'm a Pisces. We can be most often found at an art gallery in the morning, the theatre in the evening, and a séance at night. We look at the world through rose-coloured glasses."

"I'd like to see the world that way," Lily said, packing her sketchpad into her worn canvas bag. "But I think my glasses broke."

Veronica smiled at Lily sympathetically. "Look, things will get better."

Lily nodded. "They already are. I get to come here every day and do the thing I love most - draw."

One of the things she liked to do least was her waitress job at The Blue Moo burger shop. It was located on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Christopher Street, in the heart of Greenwich Village. Lily felt safe there among the many artists and social outcasts who dwelt in the surrounding blocks. Most of her time on the job was spent delivering trays heaped with greasy burgers, and collecting plates littered with congealed globs of ketchup, stiff French fries and

wadded-up paper napkins. She lived for the rare moments when business was slow and she could open her sketchbook and draw.

Her sketchbook was filled with images. Some were no more than impressions of faces, animals, or abstract shapes. Other drawings were very polished. Drawings that one day she hoped to turn into real paintings - once she could afford the canvas and special brushes and paint.

After listening to a family of tourists from Michigan complain about the heat and crazy New York cab drivers while she served them their Blue Moo Specials, Lily opened her sketchbook and took a drawing pencil from her bag.

She turned to a blank page and began to sketch the face of the old man who had helped her the day before, during the fire. Although she had only seen him for an instant, his image remained, crystal clear, in her mind. Sort of a cross between Santa Claus and an old prospector out of a Western movie. A kind face but one worn and wrinkled and made wise by life's hard lessons.

She had barely finished the sketch – when her hand suddenly seemed to move by itself to a clean spot on the same page. "This is pretty weird," she whispered to herself.

Lily watched in amazement as she drew the faces of a woman and a scruffy little girl. The woman's face was not Stormy's, and the little girl was neither Lily nor Rosa. Still, there was something familiar about them.

"Miss Martinez, when you're done doodling, perhaps you'd care to wipe off the counter."

"Sorry, Mr Diamond." Lily stuffed her sketchbook and pencil back into the bag and grabbed a wet dishrag.

Mr. Diamond owned six Blue Moo burger shops round the city. He rarely came round to check on his employees. It was just Lily's luck that he had shown up now.

The owner totalled up the day's receipts on the cash register. "Hmm, business is off," he grumbled. "Maybe I should dock your pay."

"You can't," Lily said, keeping her eyes on the counter. "I'm only getting minimum wage as it is."

"Hey, that was a joke," Mr. Diamond said. "You're too serious. Don't you know a joke when you hear one?"

*No. But I know a jerk when I see one.*

"Say, wasn't there a big fire in your neighbourhood yesterday?"

Lily nodded. "A warehouse blew up."

"As long as you don't get caught, that sort of thing makes good financial sense," Mr. Diamond said, counting the money in the cash drawer. "You're a landlord stuck with a bad property in a neighbourhood that, for some crazy reason, people with money think will be the next great thing. So you find a

couple of kids needing to make a few bucks, let them torch the place, collect the insurance and - bingo - you put in half-a-million-dollar lofts and retire to Florida."

He finished counting the bills, helped himself to a hot dog and soft drink, then stood in front of Lily, who was now filling the ketchup bottles.

"Tuck your shirt in," he murmured. "And if I catch you loafing on the job again, you can join the rest of your friends on the street. Clear?"

"Perfectly clear," Lily said, finding the courage to stare at him.

The minute he left the tiny restaurant, she cranked up the air conditioning and helped herself to a large cold drink. *He'll be sorry, when I'm a great artist and he's rotting in a prison somewhere.*

"Lily, you got to help me," a voice rasped from the door.

Lily was stunned to see her sister stumble into the restaurant. Rosa had been crying and her face was puffy and swollen. She held a hand over one eye. Lily could see that the eye and cheekbone had been badly bruised.

"Rosa! What happened?" Lily wet a cloth and ran round the counter.

"First, promise you won't tell Stormy," Rosa sobbed as Lily pressed the cloth gently against the bruises. "Promise you won't tell anyone!"

"I promise. What happened?"

"I'm so stupid!" Rosa said with intense rage before collapsing against Lily.

"Rosa, calm down. Tell me what happened."

Her sister took a few deep breaths. "Lily, I'm in such trouble!"

"Rosa, what?"

She took a few more breaths. "OK. Please, don't get crazy. But I've been seeing this guy named Hero."

"Hero?"

"Hero, right," Rosa nodded. "I think it's a nickname, but that's not important. He's with the Lucifers."

"Which is why you knew about that cap." Lily glanced nervously towards the door, hoping Mr. Diamond wouldn't change his mind and return.

"Sometimes Hero is the nicest guy in the world," Rosa continued. "But sometimes – like today – he's a total psycho. I told him about you finding the Lucifer cap, and he went nuts. He wanted to know exactly where you'd found it and I said, how would I know? So he hit me and..." She couldn't finish. "I'm scared, Lily. Really scared."

"You stay here until I get off work," Lily said, pouring Rosa a glass of lemonade. "Understand?"

"I was hoping you'd say that," her sister said, smiling weakly.

"And then we need to think. About why the Lucifers would be so freaked out about me finding a hat on the street. And what we're going to do about it."

### CHAPTER THREE

That night, after everyone else had gone to bed, Lily stuck the winged Lucifer cap into a paper bag and crept out of the apartment.

She climbed the stairs up to the sixth floor, where she opened the door on to the roof.

It was her favourite place at night. Above the turmoil of the street, she could see the magic lights of New York City's skyscrapers. It was a fairy-tale view. A place to have romantic dreams about falling in love. Although the beautifully lit towers were only some forty blocks away, they could have been on another planet as far as Lily's life allowed.

*There must be a better world. A world of peace and light.*

Tears filled her eyes. She wasn't feeling sorry for herself so much as for her mother and Rosa. OK, her mother was a bit crazy – so was Rosa – but didn't they deserve happiness, too?

Lily thought back to that afternoon at the restaurant with Rosa. She'd talked Rosa into holding a raw hamburger patty to her black eye and it had actually reduced the swelling. They'd walked home arm in arm, pausing at shop windows, playing a game they'd played since they were little. "If you had ten thousand dollars, what would you buy?" Then they picked out furniture for their living room, selected their wardrobe and jewellery, being careful to keep track of the money (they didn't have) that they were spending. They had a wonderful time.

Lily should have known it was too good to be true because, just as they were rounding the corner to their block, three thugs had blocked their way.

"Hero!" Rosa had gasped, instinctively raising one hand to her injured eye.

Hero was very muscular, and thought he could grow a beard. It only made his face look sinister and dirty. On top of his partially shaven head was a baseball cap with a winged patch, just like the one Lily had hidden in her room.

"So you're the big sister," Hero sneered. "You're a bit scrawny – but nice-looking enough. Rosa tells me you do pictures."

"Art is what I do," Lily snapped. "Something that wouldn't interest you."

"Feisty, too," Hero said with a smirk. "Just like little sister. I like that."

"Rosa, say good night to your friend," Lily said, tightening her grip on her sister's arm and attempting to walk round the boys.

"Not so fast, big sister." Hero blocked their way. "Rosa tells me you like the hat me and my brothers wear. So much that you stole one off a Lucifer."

"I didn't steal it. I found it. In the gutter."

"The cops can tell a lot from a person's hat," Hero continued, ignoring her. "They do that fancy DNA testing thing and find out who's been wearing it."

"What do you want?" Lily finally asked.

"That cap."

"Because it places your gang at that explosion which nearly wiped out half a city block," Lily said, feeling brave.

Without warning, Hero had reached out and grabbed Rosa by the neck. "Don't mess with me, big sister!" he warned Lily.

"Stop it!" Lily shouted. "You're choking her!"

He released his grip. Coughing, Rosa collapsed into Lily's arms.

"You creep! Get out of here!" Lily screamed. "Before I call the cops!"

"The cops can't save you," Hero said.

With that, he and his two friends had slipped into the nearest alley, leaving Lily and Rosa feeling helpless and vulnerable.

Lily peeked inside the paper bag at the cap, then shook her head. "Because of a stupid pair of wings on a baseball cap, my sister gets a black eye?"

She moved to one of the crumbling brick chimneys, long out of use, and removed a loose brick close to the base. After shoving the paper bag with the hat into the exposed hole, she set the brick back in place. This cranny had been her secret hiding place since junior high, when her mother first met Danny. Whenever he'd run out of money for cigarettes or beer, he'd developed the bad habit of emptying the girls' piggy banks. That was when Lily had begun hiding the little money she earned from baby-sitting and odd jobs.

"I'll keep the cap there until this whole thing blows over." Lily wrapped her arms round herself and looked up at the night sky. A few very faint stars twinkled back.

"Is that you, Lily?"

Lily quickly spun round as their neighbour, Mrs. Velasquez, joined her on the roof.

"Doing a little stargazing?" Mrs. Velasquez asked, shuffling across the tarmac roof. She was big and round, and walked with a definite limp ever since one of her hip sockets had been replaced a few years before. Although she was only fifty-five, she looked much older.

"I was doing more than that." Lily smiled at the older woman. "I was doing a little wishing."

"Focus on your art," the woman replied. "All your answers lie in your art."

Mrs. Velasquez was their block's resident fortune-teller. Usually she sat at a cardboard table at the entrance to their building, drinking cup after cup of coffee and offering advice on spiritual matters to anyone who would pay. Mostly she read palms, but she also did astrological charts. That took more time and, of course, cost more. Once Mrs. Velasquez had done Lily's chart, in exchange for some house cleaning.

Lily smirked. "All the answers?"

"For you, yes." Mrs. Velasquez squinted at Lily. "My dear, you are a Libra. Venus rules Libra. Are you in love?"

Lily blinked in surprise. "No. I'm not in anything."

Mrs. Velasquez nodded firmly as if to say, that proves it. "Then put everything into your art. It is your source of beauty, of love. It is your wish come true."

The older woman then turned and retreated across the roof.

"Mrs. Velasquez," Lily called after her. "Is that why you came up here? To tell me that?"

Mrs. Velasquez scratched her head. "I'm not sure why I came up. Maybe for the air." She shrugged. "Whatever."

Then she disappeared through the thick metal door.

Lily gazed across the roof to the abandoned building down the block, trying to absorb what the fortune-teller had told her. As she stared at the rows of windows reflecting the lights from the other buildings, Lily swore she saw a face smiling at her. The face of an old man - like the one who had helped her two days before. Could it be?

He was there just for an instant, but she was certain she'd seen him. Lily stared hard at all of the windows, waiting for him to return, but he didn't.

The next day, Lily was the first to arrive in class. She had taken Mrs. Velasquez's advice and was busy pouring herself into her art. A book of Impressionist painters that she'd borrowed from the library lay open on the wide window ledge next to her easel.

"Happy pictures," she'd murmured to herself the night before as she drifted to sleep. "I'm going to paint happy pictures. And force my life to imitate my art."

The happiest picture she knew was one called *Ball at the Moulin de la Galette*, which Renoir painted in 1876.



The picture was of an outdoor party, with women wearing long, bustled dresses dancing with elegant men sporting derby or straw hats. In the foreground, some other smiling, fashionable people rested at a table, chatting among themselves. In the middle was a woman listening intently to a man, her arm resting fondly on the shoulder of her daughter. Beaming genially at both of them was a bearded old man, his warm eyes twinkling—

*It can't be! That would be too weird!*

Leaving the art book open, she hurriedly pulled her sketchbook from her bag. She opened it to the drawing she'd done at work the day before. The one of the kind old man, the woman and the girl.

A chill raced down Lily's spine as she compared her image with the Renoir painting.

*It is!*

Her sketches of the old man, woman and girl were identical to the figures painted by Renoir.

*It must be because I've studied this painting so often. Somehow Renoir's figures got into my head. That's all.*

Lily was so busy comparing the two pictures that she didn't notice the classroom filling up round her. Several students stood in the centre of the room, chatting. Towards the front of the studio a boy Lily didn't recognize was having an intense conversation with her teacher, Veronica.

He was dressed in a sleeveless T-shirt and baggy pants. His back was turned, revealing a broad set of shoulders and very bronzed, muscular arms. The morning light streamed across his well-defined muscles that glistened slightly with perspiration. Without thinking, Lily began to sketch him. She drew freely, concentrating solely on the light and dark, and the shadows in the curves. Veronica nodded several times as she talked to the boy, then opened a schedule book. The boy leaned across the desk and for the first time Lily caught sight of his profile. Long, aquiline nose. Thick dark hair curling over an intense brow. Strong jaw. *Very handsome*, she thought, as she continued to draw.

"Fine. Then we'll see you on Friday," Veronica said, loud enough for Lily to hear. "And welcome to the class."

The boy's face lit up. He knocked twice on the desk in affirmation, then turned.

Lily caught sight of his face and her charcoal snapped in her fingers. *He's the one! The boy at the explosion. I found his cap.*

The boy met her look and responded with the same jolt of surprise. He gave her a barely perceptible nod, then disappeared down the stairs.

Lily turned her eyes back to her drawing. She'd caught something in there. A boy with an open face, eager to learn. Every muscle poised, ready to devote himself to art.

*How could this boy, this beautiful boy, be a Lucifer?*

## CHAPTER FOUR

*You have a deep melancholia with the new moon sneaking into your dreams. Try to fight it. This is a chance for new beginnings. However, Mercury cautions you to guard your tongue.*

"You had better by god clean this up or I'll... I'll..." Danny raised his fist and Stormy caught hold of his arm.

"Danny, please, we're all upset," Stormy said. "It's nobody's fault."

Danny had taken them all out for an early dinner at Popeye's fast-food restaurant to celebrate his homecoming. When they returned to the apartment, they discovered that someone had broken in and ransacked the entire place.

"This is your doing." Danny pointed a fat finger at Rosa. "Your no-good friends trashed this place."

"Listen to him," Rosa screamed at Stormy. "My room got hit the hardest. Where does he get off?"

Lily stood in the bedroom, in shock. Drawers had been pulled out of every chest of drawers, boxes scooped off wardrobe shelves and heaved on to the floor. Her mattress had even been flipped up. But nothing was missing.

"Look, Danny." Stormy gestured frantically to the rooms round the apartment. "The TV's still here. My jewellery box, your camera. It's all here."

"They must have been looking for something," Lily murmured. "But what?"

Rosa shot Lily a look to silence her. Lily cocked her head in confusion. Rosa did know something about this.

"They were looking for drugs," Danny continued to rant. He turned on Rosa. "*Your drugs*. So you clean it up." He stomped into the bedroom, kicking the clothes and boxes that littered the floor out of his way.

"No way. I'm not lifting a finger." Rosa folded her arms stubbornly across her chest. Then she turned and muttered to Lily, "You're the one who caused this. You do it."

"Me?" Lily's eyes widened. Hero must have broken into the apartment, knowing they were going to be gone. They tore the house apart looking for – a hat! The Lucifer cap!

"Come on, girls," Stormy said, with a frightened glance towards the bedroom where Danny had gone. "We'll all clean. It will go much faster if the three of us do it."

"Stormy's right," Lily said, trying to be peacemaker. "Let's not make such a big deal of it. I'll put the clothes back in the drawers and wardrobes. Stormy, why don't you get the vacuum? Rosa, you can help by—"

"Forget it!" Rosa threw the cushions back on the couch and flopped on top of them. She crossed her arms and grumbled, "Stormy, you said it was going to be different. That Danny was a new man. Well, he looks like the same old jerk to me!"

"What did you say?" Danny said, stomping back into the room. He yanked Rosa to her feet. "You little brat!"

"Let her go!" Lily ordered.

"Danny, please settle down," Stormy said. Her voice was barely a whisper. "Let's all sit down and discuss this like civilized—"

"She's got a mouth on her!" Danny said, shaking Rosa's arm. "When I was her age, if I talked back like that, I'd get a beating I'd never forget."

"And look how you turned out," Rosa said boldly.

"What did you say?" Danny said between clenched teeth.

"You heard me," Rosa answered, trying to act brave. "If I saw you be nice to Stormy for even five minutes, maybe I'd respect you. But you're nothing but a fat slob. I hate you both!"

Stormy quickly jumped in, clutching Danny's other arm. "She didn't mean it, Danny. She likes you. It's the heat. It's hard to think when it's so hot. Danny, honey, go run your errands. Please. The girls and I will have this place all shiny when you return."

Stormy's words did nothing to lessen Danny's fury. "I'm not budging until Rosa apologizes!" Still clutching her arm he raised it and stared at Rosa with a killer's eyes. "Well? I'm waiting."

Rosa stared back, her lips sealed.

Danny shook her once. Then again. "Apologize, you little brat!" he screamed.

"Or you'll do what?"

"Rosa, just say you're sorry," Lily pleaded. She didn't like the look in Danny's eyes. She'd seen it before. "Please. It's not worth it."

"Just because you're a coward like Mom doesn't mean I am," Rosa said. "Let go of me, Danny. You're hurting me."

"Apologize!"

"Rosa, sweetie," Stormy said, her voice quivering. "Do what Danny says." Stormy grabbed Danny's arm again. "Danny, she's sorry. She's still a kid. We're trying to be a family. Let's not lose our heads over some silly—"

*Smack!*

Rosa's head spun with the force of Danny's blow to her cheek.

"Apologize!" he ordered.

Lily tried to pull Danny away but he was too strong. While holding Rosa with one hand, he easily pushed Lily away with the other. She tumbled to the floor.

"Rosa, for God's sake, don't be so stubborn," Stormy pleaded with tears in her eyes. "Please, Rosa. Say you're sorry."

Touching her face, Rosa glared at Danny.

"I'm waiting," Danny said, still towering over her.

"Just do it," Lily said, getting to her feet. "Please, Rosa. Don't make it worse."

"I'm..." Rosa started in a hoarse whisper. "I'm..." She couldn't get the words out.

Danny leaned his face close to hers, as if to make it easier for her.

When he was a couple of centimetres away, Rosa spat in his face. "I hope you die!" she sneered.

For a moment it looked like Danny was too shocked to react. But only for a moment. Then, in one horrible motion, he twisted Rosa's arm behind her, wrenching it out of its socket.

Screaming in pain, Rosa fell to her knees, clutching her arm.

"Oh, Danny, how could you!" Stormy gasped.

"Mom, call 911!" Lily ordered, rushing to help her sister.

His fury spent, Danny walked out of the apartment as if nothing had happened.

"Call 911!" Lily screamed. "He broke Rosa's arm."

"Oh, I'm sure it isn't broken," Stormy began to babble. "It was an accident. It's probably just a sprain. Rosa, you always pretend it's much worse than it really is. Danny wouldn't hurt you. He loves you girls."

The emergency room doctor said Rosa's shoulder had been dislocated. He put it in a shoulder immobilizer that looked like a sling, but kept her from using her arm or shoulder. He also gave her some medicine for the pain. "Is there something else I should know about this?" he asked Stormy and Lily privately.

"Know?" Stormy repeated innocently.

"Like how it happened," the doctor said. "I'm obligated to call the police if I think someone hurt your daughter on purpose."

*Tell him, Mom! Tell him so they'll lock Danny away where he can't hurt any of us.*

"Rosa's my clumsy child," Stormy said instead. "Why, just a couple days ago she fell on the sidewalk and came home with a black eye."

"You're telling me that Rosa's injury was accidental," the doctor said.

"That's right," Stormy said firmly.

"Do you realize how difficult it is to dislocate a shoulder?" the doctor continued. His expression was very skeptical.

"Well, I'm no expert," Stormy said with a shrug.

The doctor turned to Lily. "Is your mother telling the truth?"

Lily froze like an animal caught in car headlights. *Do I tell him my mother is a liar? Get her in trouble, when the real problem is Danny?*

She glanced at her mother. Stormy was pleading with her eyes for Lily to lie to the doctor.

Lily hated her mother for being so weak. She hated the world for making her that way.

"I didn't see what happened, exactly," Lily told the doctor. She kept her eyes down, so he couldn't look in them. "Rosa's going to be all right. Isn't she, Doctor?"

"It'll take four to six weeks to mend properly," the doctor said. He was obviously disappointed at Lily's answer. "Just so you know, I'm going to go ahead and file a report with Social Services."

"Doctor, is that really necessary?" Stormy asked.

"It's my legal duty to notify the authorities of my suspicions," he said coldly. "I truly hope you ladies know what you're doing. If you're protecting an abuser, he'll hurt one of you again. And next time, you may not escape with a dislocated shoulder."

When he left to get Rosa, Stormy turned to Lily. "Thanks, baby," she said.

Lily nodded. But she not only hated the world she lived in. She also hated herself.

On the bus ride home, Lily sat with her arm round Rosa, while in the next row of seats Stormy nervously made small talk with a stranger.

"I can call Kit," Lily said in a quiet voice. "She's in my art class. She would probably help us, maybe even let us move in with her until this thing blows over."

"This won't blow over. Not until Danny's dead," Rosa said darkly. "I'd like Hero to take care of him."

"You mean, do to him what he did to you?" Lily asked.

"In spades!" Rosa muttered. "And the sooner, the better."

Lily looked out the window of the moving bus and worried. *Why didn't I say something to the doctor? This is only going to get worse.*

Back at home, Lily and her mother tidied up the apartment. But Danny didn't come home for dinner. And he must have found another place to play cards because he wasn't home by ten o'clock either.

When the phone rang late, Lily was convinced it was Danny so she let Stormy answer it.

"Just a moment," she heard her mother say into the phone. "I'll get her." Covering the mouthpiece, Stormy said, "Lily, it's for you."

*Maybe it's Kit. Maybe I can talk to her about helping us out.*

Lily took the phone from her mother and waited until Stormy left the room before saying, "Hello?"

"Lily, sorry to bother you so late. Especially at the weekend."

The voice was familiar but Lily couldn't place who it was, exactly. "I just had the most fabulous news," the voice continued. "And, frankly, even though I'm going to see you Monday, I couldn't wait to share it with you."

"Veronica!" Lily said, surprised.

"Did I mention that a friend at city hall was working on an idea of mine?" Veronica continued.

"No," Lily replied.

"Well, I probably didn't say anything for fear that it would get your hopes up." Veronica was talking very quickly, the way New Yorkers did when especially excited. "Anyway, Lily, the point is that the city has allocated money to beautify some buildings with public art – murals, sculpture, mosaics, that sort of thing."

"I've seen a couple of the projects round here," Lily said.

"Good," Veronica said. "So you know what I'm talking about. Well, the city gave MIVA a building to decorate with a mural on East 13th Street at Avenue D. It's abandoned now, a fire hazard, really. A regular eyesore. I'm surprised it hasn't been condemned – because no one has lived in it for years."

"I think I know the one," Lily said. "It's not far from here." She didn't want to deflate Veronica's balloon by telling her the address was in the heart of gang territory.

"At first, I thought I'd make it a class project," Veronica went on. "You know, get everyone involved."

"That sounds like a good plan," Lily said. She wasn't sure what to say.

"But I got to thinking that, you know the old saying, 'Too many cooks spoil the broth'," Veronica added with an unusual giggle. "Too many artists with too many different ideas and approaches and techniques, and that building may end up even uglier than it is now!"

Lily smiled at her art teacher's attempt at humour.

"Lily, I want you to execute the mural," Veronica finally explained. "Alone."

"Me?" Lily gasped. "Really? Me?"

"Why not?" Veronica said confidently. "You're the best student at MIVA. You're a part of the neighbourhood. It would be a great way to have people notice your work."

Suddenly all of the Libra doubt inside Lily threatened the joy she was feeling. "An entire building? Oh, Veronica..."

"I'll be there to help and guide you," Veronica assured her. "And I almost forgot to tell you the best part. The city is paying for all supplies and has allotted five hundred dollars as an honorarium for the artist."

"Five hundred dollars!" Lily felt like fainting. That was practically her entire summer's wages as a waitress.

"Now go to sleep," Veronica chuckled. "And have very pleasant dreams. I'll see you Monday."

Lily hung up and ran up to the roof. She didn't want anything to spoil her good news. A cool breeze blew across the building, rattling the TV antennas and the flapping line of clothes that someone had forgotten to take in.

Lily spread her arms and cried "Thank you!" to the lights twinkling above her. She spun in a circle, enjoying the pure, clean feeling of just being happy. As she spun, Lily sensed without even having to look that someone was watching her. Someone good and friendly. She didn't need to look but smiled and waved her hand towards the second window from the top in the abandoned building across the street.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Venus transiting Mars makes for a challenging aspect in solar houses of friends and children. Being cautious is not being chicken, it's just acknowledging the world we live in. There is a spirit of joy that is now keeping you awake nights. Enjoy.*

**M**onday afternoon Lily called the Blue Moo and happily quit her job. *From now on I only do my art*, she thought proudly. Her art class that morning had been

wonderful. Everyone offered to help and she gratefully accepted their offers, promising to call them as soon as the design was complete.

Unfortunately, the location for the mural was worse than Lily remembered. The old brick building had long been abandoned to rats, vandals, and the elements. The place stank of rotting garbage. The wall where the mural was to be painted was crumbling and coated with spray-painted graffiti. And, if that wasn't bad enough, someone had thrown a bunch of eggs at it, causing a smelly mess.

Nevertheless, Lily sat on the kerb across the street and began to compose her picture.

*I'll pay homage to the great Renoir. I'll use Impressionistic techniques and paint an outdoor ball. But, instead of nineteenth century French people, I'll use people who look like modern day New Yorkers. Young and old. Black and white, Asian and Hispanic -people from round the world. I'll make it a street party in a village. Everyone will be there to have a good time, not to cause any trouble.*

The more she thought about the idea, the more excited she became.

*I'll put in a salsa band playing Latin jazz. A younger, happier version of Stormy can be the lead singer. I'll use Phil Boskowski's face for the bass player. I'll make fun of Mr. Diamond and have him serving sundaes, his apron stained with rainbow-coloured sprinkles. I'll have Rosa and Kit and Veronica dancing with the men of their dreams.*

Ignoring sirens and car horns and buses rumbling by and the million other sounds of the city, Lily took out her sketchbook and went to work. She tried several different compositions, quickly doodling in various foregrounds and backgrounds, before deciding on an approach. She took out a set of coloured pencils and, again working quickly, laid out a basic colour plan on the mural.

There was a lot of work involved. Even with help from Kit and other volunteers, Lily figured she had a solid four weeks of work. And that was if everything went without a hitch.

"Excuse me," she said to an old woman pulling a small trolley full of groceries behind her. "Can you tell me what time it is?"

"It's nearly five o'clock," the woman said, after checking her watch. "If I were you I wouldn't stay in this area too late. A girl, alone. It's not safe."

"Thanks," Lily said. "But I'm supposed to meet someone from the city here. Don't worry, I'll be careful."

The city was supposed to have delivered her supplies by three o'clock, but so far no one had arrived. Still, Lily wasn't about to get discouraged. If they



didn't come today, she'd make a phone call and things would get straightened out. She realized she'd probably need more than paint.

"A ladder, scaffolding, something to hold my paint, like a table or some kind of box," Lily murmured as she wandered round the vacant lot next to her building. There was a huge collection of trash, broken glass and bricks where another building once stood. The lot even included the rusting hulks of two stolen automobiles that had been stripped for parts and abandoned.

Other people might have been disgusted by the debris, but for Lily, it was like combing a beach of beautiful shells. *Maybe there's some wood I can nail together. Or some old crates to stand on.*

She picked up a five-gallon tin which once held cooking oil. *I can use this old can for mixing paint. And here's a splendid mixing stick,* she thought, pulling a jagged piece of wood out of the weeds.

Usually Lily was extra cautious in this neighbourhood, but today she was on cloud nine. Nothing could possibly harm her.

Lily was so lost in her search, she barely noticed the car that slowed as it passed her part of the block. She heard the rumbling engine and started to stand up and look when out of nowhere a scruffy street kid suddenly appeared and grabbed her canvas bag. The kid took off in a flash.

"Hey!" Lily shouted. "Come back here!"

She gave chase, cutting across the lot, heading for the dark shadows of the building. The kid was able to keep running and go through Lily's bag at the same time. Out went Lily's keys and, luckily, her sketchbook. In another direction soared the coloured pencils and pieces of chalk.

Determined, Lily scooped up her supplies and closed the distance between herself and the kid. "Give that back!" she screamed. "There's nothing in there for you."

With a mighty effort she swung out, knocking the kid to the ground. The kid fell forward, rolling through a pile of rotting garbage.

Furious, Lily retrieved her bag and grabbed the kid by the back of the shirt. "What's the matter with you? I've come here to add a little beauty to your stinking neighbourhood and I'm not even here a day —"

Lily stopped short when she saw the child's face.

*It can't be!*

It was the face of the girl from the Renoir painting. The same upturned nose and big, wide, brown eyes she had sketched on her pad at work.

"Do you know me?" Lily asked in a shaky voice.

The girl shook her head.

"Who are you?" Lily demanded. "What did you expect to find in my bag?"

The girl wouldn't answer.

*This is crazy but maybe she's French.*

So in her best high school French, Lily asked, "*Parlez-vous Anglais?*"

Again, the girl said nothing.

Frustrated, Lily took the girl by the arms and began to shake her. "Tell me who you are," she demanded.

The girl's teeth chattered together and Lily suddenly realized what she was doing. Horrified at her behaviour, Lily let the girl go.

"I'm sorry. Are you hungry?" Lily said, digging in the side zipper compartment of her bag. "Is that it?" She took the few crumpled dollars she had and offered them to the girl.

But the girl refused them. Instead she took off like a shot across the vacant lot. Lily hurriedly flipped open her sketchbook to the page she'd drawn on a week before.

"It's definitely the same face," she murmured. "Down to the dimple in the right cheek." Lily suddenly shivered. "Weird."

She carried the pad back across the lot and stood in front of her canvas, the giant wall. She had intended to go home and come back the next day after she'd contacted the city, but Lily was suddenly filled with the desperate need to start the picture now.

*The sooner the better.*

She quickly assembled the crates and boxes she had collected and arranged them into crude scaffolding.

It was well after dark when Lily finished outlining her mural in chalk. Fortunately a bright safety light, installed by the building's owners to keep vandals away, made it possible for her to keep working once the sunlight had faded. And Lily was pleased with her first effort.

She had outlined a ridge of gently rolling hills to serve as the background. Above them, the moon, stars and planets protected the scene like a cosmic canopy. In the foreground were happy people who had come to the village from all over the globe. And right in the front she added the kind old man from the street, the street urchin she'd just met, and the woman.

Lily decided the mural would be her proof that a better world existed. One where gentle people lived without hate.

Lily wanted to paint in a reference to Renoir's France. After some thought, she decided to outline a pretty gazebo in one corner of the mural. And peeking out of the gazebo towards the viewer she outlined a female form.

*Maybe I'll make the girl Rosa. Or Stormy when she was young and innocent and happy.* Lily couldn't make up her mind so she didn't draw the girl's face yet.

*I don't want her to be alone.* Lily added a male form next to the mystery girl. Again, she wasn't ready to decide on the boy's features.

Satisfied with her start, Lily headed for home. In her mind she was already making changes to her design. That was one of the magical things about painting. It was always changing, growing like a real living organism. Veronica had often said that the best art was "organic". Now Lily knew what she meant.

Normally at night, Lily kept to the main cross streets. The ones with plenty of light and lots of people. But since she was in a hurry to get a good night's rest, she took the most direct route home, through some very dangerous blocks.

She took long strides, kept her head down and avoided the few people sharing the sidewalk. She hurried, ignoring the sounds of arguments and loud music coming from tenement windows.

Then she heard the low rumbling of a car slowing down behind her. She held her breath, waiting for it to drive past. But it didn't. It was trailing her!

She didn't want to panic but she was scared. She looked ahead, seeking an alley or store - any safe way to escape. But there was nothing.

Then the car sped up and quickly passed her.

*Whew! That was close. Tomorrow night, take the safe way home.*

Relieved, Lily eased her pace. *Only four more blocks. You can make it. Four more blocks.*

Ahead the car made a slow 180-degree turn and came to a stop.

*Oh, no!*

All four doors opened at the same time. A group of boys got out and stood by the car. Waiting for Lily.

*Don't show them you're afraid. Keep walking.*

Her eyes lowered, she approached the car. The boys did not budge.

*Maybe they're waiting for someone else.*

She tried her best to ignore them, but they started closing in on her.

"Well, well, well. Look who we found. If it isn't Rosa's big sister."

*Hero!* Lily's heart was racing.

The boy grabbed her arm and swung her round. She landed against the bonnet of the car, which knocked her breath away.

"Let me go," she managed to gasp. "Please."

From his pocket Hero drew a gun which he held at Lily's temple.

*He's going to kill me!*

"Hero, let her go!"

The voice wasn't coming from the car. It was coming from a boy approaching on foot.

"Stay out of this, Nick," Hero snarled. "She's mine."

"Let her go. Find your fun elsewhere," the boy named Nick ordered.

Nick met Lily's eyes. It was the same intense stare he'd given her that morning at the art school.

"You're the one who screwed up," Hero continued. "I'm just helping you out."

"Don't do me any favours," Nick said with a casual shrug. Without warning, he whirled his leg round, Kung Fu style, knocking the gun from Hero's hand.

He followed with a sharp elbow jab which caught Hero in the jaw, sending him crashing against the bonnet beside Lily.

Nick jumped on Hero, but the other boy managed to squirm free and hit Nick on the head with his fist.

In the eerie light of the car's headlights, the two struggled. Hero kicked Nick in the ribs and doubled him over. Nick head-butted Hero. Blood splattered against the windshield. Finally, Nick knocked Hero out with a punch whose impact Lily could feel inside her own head.

In the confusion Lily tried to escape, but one of the other gang members grabbed her.

While Hero lay sprawled on the ground, the other boys surrounded Nick, congratulating him on a good fight.

Pretending to appreciate the adoration, Nick nonchalantly walked over and picked up Hero's gun. He made sure it was loaded, then aimed it at the other boys.

"Hey, man, that's not funny!" one of them protested.

"Yeah, put that thing down, Nick," another said. "We know Hero had it coming."

"Go," Nick said quietly. "Leave the girl, take Hero, get in the car – and go."

With the gun pointed at them, the gang members were all too happy to oblige. In a matter of seconds they were gone, and the street was dark and quiet again.

Nick slowly lowered the gun, then looked at Lily. She was shaking with fear, trying to hold down her sobs. He tossed the gun as far as he could into the night.

"I'll walk you home," he said.

"I can't go home," Lily said, her voice uncontrollable. "Not now."

Nick nodded. "You hurt?"

Lily looked down at Nick's bloody hand.

Then she looked at his face. It was beaded with sweat and blood and dirt. It was the face of someone with nothing left to lose.

## CHAPTER SIX

Against her better judgement, Lily realized she wasn't afraid of Nick. If nothing else, he had saved her from the Lucifers - just as days earlier he had warned her that the warehouse was about to explode.

"Sure I can't walk you home?" he offered again.

Lily shook her head. She wasn't ready to face her mother, sister, and especially Danny. "I don't want to go there right now."

He accepted her explanation as if he understood perfectly why someone might not want to go home. "How about we go somewhere, and talk?"

Lily hesitated. "I don't know..."

"There's that great old diner underneath the highway," he suggested. "The one they always use as a movie location."

Lily knew the place. There were always lots of people there, even at this late hour. She'd be safe.

"Are you hurt?" Lily asked as they started to walk.

"Nothing that will kill me," Nick joked. "I'm sorry for you."

"It was my own fault," Lily said, "for walking home alone at this hour."

"What were you doing out so late?" he asked. Then he quickly added, "Not that it's any of my business."

"I was starting a mural," she said. "The city gave me the side of that building on East 13th at Avenue D. Well, they didn't actually give it to me, they gave it to Veronica—" Lily paused. "Say, what were you doing at MIVA last week?"

"Signing up for art class."

Lily squinted at Nick. He was a mass of contradictions. One second savagely fighting Hero and the next talking about taking art class. "It doesn't fit," she said finally.

Nick stared down at her with almost black eyes, surrounded by very dark lashes, and murmured, "We all do what we gotta do, to survive."

Lily thought about how she put up with Danny and her awful life at home and that terrible job with Mr. Diamond, and nodded her head. "I guess you're right. Some seem to do a better job of surviving."

Nick watched Lily with a fierce intensity that she'd rarely seen except in the faces of people who were angry. But he wasn't angry. He seemed to be

searching. "You were given the mural," he reminded her. "If that isn't a chance for survival, I don't know what is."

Lily pursed her lips. "I don't know why Veronica chose me, but I'm glad she did."

"Maybe she chose you because you're good," Nick said, his face still as serious as ever.

Lily was starting to wonder what he would look like if he smiled. He was already so handsome, a smile would probably be too much to bear.

"Do you believe in astrology?" Lily asked suddenly, for no reason except she wanted to know more about him.

"Why?" Nick cocked his head to look at her. "Do you want to know my sign?"

"Well, I only know a little about that stuff," Lily replied, suddenly feeling very silly. "It's just that Veronica and I talked about how we seemed to really reflect the traits of our sun signs, and I was just wondering if the same was true with you."

He continued to study her face. "I'm not sure. See if you can guess my sign."

Lily sighed. "Let's see, I've seen you three times. Two times have been very scary because you were angry. And yet you can also turn off the anger and be quite nice."

This caused Nick to smile. A small one, just a slight lifting at the corners of his mouth. But it was a start.

"For all your tough guy act," she continued, "I think there's a gentleness buried inside you, somewhere."

Nick raised an eyebrow but didn't contradict her.

"You signed up for art class, so you have a strong appreciation for beauty." Lily gestured to his clothes, which were dirty and torn from the fight. "Before you met up with Hero, you were wearing a nice-looking outfit."

He clasped his hands behind his back. "So what does this all add up to?"

"My guess is you're a Taurus," Lily said.

Nick stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and shook his head.

"I'm wrong?" Lily asked.

"No," he said. "You got me nailed. May fifth."

Lily smiled triumphantly. Walking side by side, Lily felt something pulling her towards this strange boy. He must have felt the attraction, too, because he let his hand brush against hers.

They arrived at the diner with its bright red neon sign blinking into the dark city sky. It was all shiny chrome and glass, ablaze with fluorescent lights. A line of cabs were parked at the front.

Nick held the door open for Lily. Inside, they found a quiet booth and sat down.

A waitress with wild hair and smeared lipstick dropped off two plastic-covered menus. "Be right with you kids," she said, running off to pick up an order from the short-order cook.

Lily smiled across the table, and Nick smiled back. Scared at how right it felt, Lily quickly hid behind her opened menu. She looked for the cheapest thing, which was a bagel and a cup of coffee.

"I don't know your name," Nick said, continuing to smile at her.

"Lily," she said, putting down the menu. "Lily Martinez."

"I'm Nick Santos," he said. "You live round here?"

"In a building off Avenue C, between Fourth and Fifth," she replied. "You?"

"Oh, nowhere near here," he said.

His lack of a real answer annoyed her. "So what do you do when you're not torching buildings?" she asked boldly.

Nick leaned across the table. "That's in the past," he murmured intensely. "I quit the Lucifers."

"Why? You didn't want to buy a new cap?" she asked, trying to keep the conversation light.

"I came to my senses," he said, not laughing. "I found something much more important than running with those fools."

The waitress interrupted the conversation. "So, who's having what?"

Lily went first, then Nick ordered a grilled cheese sandwich and French fries.

"Something to drink?" the waitress asked him.

"Coffee," they both said at once.

"Lots of it," Nick added.

"Ah, planning on a long evening, I see," the waitress said, wiggling her eyebrows.

Nick looked at Lily, and the two started to laugh.

*I can't remember the last time I laughed,* Lily thought. *Especially with a boy.* She wanted to reach across the table and take his hand – but what if he withdrew it?

Finally, Nick said, "Tell me about your mural."

"Well," Lily began, "I really like this artist, Renoir. He lived in France a hundred years ago. He was an Impressionist painter—"

"I know his work," Nick cut in. "And all about the Impressionists. I like them, too. But not as much as the Expressionists. Now those guys – they were out there, right on the edge."

It was hard for Lily to fathom that a gang member would know anything about the world outside his turf. Most of them were high school drop-outs. "How did you get interested in art?" she asked.

The waitress returned with their orders before he could answer. Nick devoured his sandwich in three bites and then went to work on the French fries. "Sorry," he said, "but this is my first meal today. Anyway, what were you saying?"

"I was wondering how you became an artist," Lily said.

"Right." After swallowing his next mouthful, he said, "Last year I started air-brushing T-shirts. I discovered I was really pretty good at it. But after a while I realized I could be better, so I decided to check out MIVA. They told me to talk to Veronica and that's when you saw me. I like her. She's cool. "

On a whim, Lily took her sketchbook and a pen from her bag. "Here," she said, opening it at a clean page. "Draw something."

"What should I draw?"

"You decide."

Nick wiped his hands on a paper napkin and thought for a few moments. "OK," he said, turning the book towards him and taking the pen. "Aw, go ahead and eat," he added with a grin. "I don't like people watching me while I work."

Happy, Lily munched on her bagel and slowly sipped the strong, hot coffee.

Nick took his time. Because he was shielding the sketchbook, Lily could not see exactly what he was drawing. Nick worked intently, letting his few remaining French fries get cold.

After a few minutes, he said, "There!" He turned the book round and presented his work to Lily.

She nearly fainted.

"What's the matter?" he asked, his face falling in dismay. "You don't like it?"

Lily stared numbly at the page. Nick had drawn the kind old man, the woman, and the girl!

"You copied my sketch!" she accused him.

"What sketch?" he asked.

"My sketch of those same faces! It's on the previous page."

"No, I didn't," he protested. "You were sitting here the whole time. Did I look at your sketch?"

"Then you must've seen my rough outline for the mural!" she said.

"I swear I didn't," he said. "These are my, um, my friends."

"You know these people?" Lily was amazed.

"Yeah. Sort of. Let's just say they've helped me out of a few jams."



"This is too weird," Lily whispered. "I swear I saw this very same woman and that little girl in a painting. But then, this afternoon, that little girl tried to steal my bag. And now you say you know them. Who are these people?"

Nick stared at Lily for a long time. "Maybe it's time we got our check," was all he said.

They had walked in silence most of the way back to Lily's apartment, when Nick finally spoke.

"Tell me something," he said. "What do you think about fate?"

"Fate?"

"Some people say there are no coincidences," Nick said as they strolled down the nearly empty city street. "You know, I run into you the day I quit the Lucifers, then discover you again at art class. Then tonight, I suddenly felt the need to go out – and there you are again."

Lily nodded. "And those people, the faces we both drew. That was very eerie."

Nick shoved his hands in his pockets. "But then, if there really is some sort of game plan for our lives, it makes me angry. About what has already happened."

"You mean, in the past?"

Nick nodded. "Yeah. Mom was a junkie. The operative word is, was. She died six years ago, when I was thirteen. I had three brothers and sisters. I don't know where they are, or even if they're alive. They were as strung out as she was." He threw his hands in the air. "What kind of plan is that?"

"I don't know," Lily murmured sympathetically. "I've wondered the same thing."

Nick shook his shoulders, as if to shrug off the bad memories, and turned to face Lily. "But it's all in the past. And I'm looking real hard at the future, hoping things will be better."

Lily nodded. Her life hadn't been as tough as Nick's, but it had never been easy. "My wishes for the future have always been pretty simple. I used to pray that Stormy – that's my mom – would be able to keep her job and that she'd stay single."

Nick raised an eyebrow.

"When Stormy falls in love, it's a disaster," Lily explained. "She picks total losers who sponge off her and make Rosa's and my life hell. Rosa is my sister."

"Rosa." At the mention of her name a hint of recognition flickered across his face.

"Yeah. Do you know her?"

Nick shrugged. "There are a lot of Rosas in this city."

Lily didn't want to push it. She knew Rosa had been involved with the Lucifers, but she hoped that was in the past.

"I don't know if I believe in fate," Lily continued. "But it sure seems like my luck is changing. I got that scholarship to MIVA, and Veronica chose me for the mural and—"

Lily gestured towards Nick but stopped herself from saying, "And I met you." They really had only just officially met. And so far, the circumstances had been pretty rough. She didn't know if that was good or bad luck.

"I think it was good luck," Nick replied, as if he'd read her mind. "At least for me."

Lily smiled at him. "Thank you for helping me tonight," she said finally. "I think you saved my life."

"No," Nick said, taking her hand. "You're saving mine."

Arriving at her building, they could hear loud voices coming from her apartment.

She rolled her eyes. "My mother and her third husband," she said. "They never stop. He's terrible. I hate him."

"It's hard to sort through all of the bad stuff to find the good," Nick said sincerely. "But you gotta do it. To survive. Don't listen to them, Lily. Shut out those voices."

"And seek only what's beautiful in the world," Lily murmured, remembering Mrs. Velasquez's words.

Nick met Lily's eyes with a look so full of emotion that she was certain he was going to kiss her good night. *Go ahead. I want you to.*

Instead he looked over her shoulder at something in the distance. Lily turned round to see what he was looking at. Standing in the shadows down the block were the old man and the little girl from the painting.

"Who are those people?" Lily whispered.

"I'm not really sure myself. But I like having them round." He kissed her lightly on her cheek. The kiss sent a shiver rippling down her spine. "I'll see you tomorrow. At class."

Then he hurried off in their direction. A moment later, all three figures disappeared into the night haze.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Your happy daydreams make you drop your guard. Try to be a little more careful today. Stay away from enclosed places. Something hidden is fearful, but not truly harmful.*

The next morning, Lily got up early. She tried on three different pairs of shorts and twice as many T-shirts before she finally settled on a pair of jeans and a purple T-shirt that read, "Art for Hearts' Sake". She carefully plaited her thick dark hair into a French braid down the centre of her back, then grabbed her make-up bag.

"You meeting a boy?" Stormy asked the instant she walked out of her bedroom.

Lily blinked in surprise. "No. What – why?"

Rosa, who hadn't combed her hair and was still in the T-shirt she'd slept in, stuck her head out of the kitchen. "You're wearing lipstick. You never wear lipstick unless you're in love."

Lily was horrified to hear her sister's words. She marched back to the bathroom and promptly wiped the lipstick off her lips. She didn't know which was more upsetting – the fact that her mother and sister thought the only reason she wore make-up was for a guy, or that maybe their words were true. Maybe she really was falling for this boy.

*That's ridiculous,* Lily thought as she rubbed a tissue across her lips. *You've only known him for a few hours.*

Her sister, clutching a piece of burnt toast in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, appeared in the bathroom door. "We were right, Stormy!" she shouted over her shoulder, grinning. "There *is* a boy. Lily's in love."

"Shut up out there!" Danny's voice bellowed from the bedroom.

The smile instantly vanished from Rosa's face. She still had a greenish-purple bruise round one eye. "Love'll get you nowhere," she muttered to Lily. "Look at Stormy and the Pig."

*Thunk!*

A shoe hit the bedroom door. "Shut up!"

Rosa moved towards the bedroom and screeched at the top of her lungs. "You can't make me. I live here too."

That was Lily's cue to leave. She knew that when Danny appeared from behind that door, things were only going to get worse. She decided to take Nick's advice and just shut out the voices.

"I'm getting out of here," she said, hurrying past her sister and grabbing her canvas bag and sketchpad from her bed. "If I were you, I'd do the same."

Rosa angrily tore off a corner of her toast with her teeth. "No way. This is my house. I was here first. Let him get out."

As Lily headed down the stairs she could hear loud voices beginning. By the time she hit the street, Danny and Rosa were in a fully-fledged shouting match.

As Lily walked to MIVA she tried to fill her head with good thoughts. She thought of Renoir's painting. The one with so many people enjoying themselves. That was the world she wanted to live in. Where people were loving and giving, and full of the joy of just being alive.

"Hey, Lily!" Nick cried as Lily turned the corner to MIVA. He was leaning against the weathered brick of the institute, waving. Overhead, brightly coloured banners flapped in the breeze. Nick held a sketchpad under one arm and a paper bag of supplies in his hand.

"I was about to give up on you," he said when she reached him.

"Sorry, I'm late," she said, not wanting to explain that she had taken the extra time to remove her lipstick so he wouldn't know she cared about him. Instead she said, "I had a little trouble at home."

They walked up the stairs to class, holding hands as comfortably as if they'd always been together.

Class had just begun. The other students were already at their easels, working intently. Veronica welcomed the two of them as if it were natural that they should arrive together. She gestured for Nick to find an empty place, whispering, "I suggest that you not work too near Lily. At MIVA, we need to concentrate on our work."

"Right," Nick said, blushing slightly.

He walked by Kit and found a free space next to Phil. Lily took her usual place near Kit.

"Major hunk," Kit murmured out of the side of her mouth.

Lily nodded, blushing even more than Nick.

"Is he going to help you with the mural?" Kit whispered.

Though they'd never discussed it, Lily said, "Why, yes, he is," as if it were all planned out. "We start tomorrow – after I buy the paint."

There was another model posing on the raised platform at the front of the class, but Lily could only focus on her mural and the pencil sketch she'd done the day before. She opened her pad and the figures seemed to leap to life.

Yes, the party in her painting was in full swing. Figures swirled under the canopy of trees. The afternoon sun shining through the leaves dappled patches of light over the women's dresses. The scene was so vivid that Lily could almost hear the music.

From time to time Lily heard the chime signalling the model in front of the class to change position. But it seemed to be far, far away and not once did she look up from her work. Only when Nick placed a gentle hand on her shoulder did she stir.

"You've been at it for nearly two hours," he said. "Time to take a break."

Lily blinked at him, feeling herself leaving the world of her drawing and returning to the present.

"I've got a cool box of lemonade," Kit was announcing to the group, "and my mom had the deli make up a fruit plate for the class."

Lily and Nick joined the others standing round Veronica's desk. Although it was Nick's first day at class, people just seemed to assume they were a pair. They said things like, "Would you two like some lemonade?" and, "The two of you seemed to be hard at work back there. What were you sketching?"

Nick didn't seem to mind at all. In fact he seemed pleased, saying, "We'd love some lemonade. And while you're at it, toss us a bunch of grapes."

As usual Phil was holding court. "Artists today get no respect. They used to have patrons who paid to just keep them painting. But not any more. We'll be lucky to get a small arts grant sometime in our lives."

Veronica clapped him on the shoulder. "Things were not that much better in the past. Look at the artists who never made a penny when they were alive. Van Gogh only became famous after his death."

"I've got it!" Phil said. "I'll paint several magnificent paintings and then spread the rumour that I'm dead. Then, while my lawyer sells them for beaucoup bucks, I sit back and enjoy myself."

"Doing what?" Lily asked. "Not painting."

"I know, I know." Phil waved one hand airily at Lily. "I wouldn't be able to sell my new pieces because how would we explain the sudden appearance of a new body of work?"

"You could suddenly come back from the dead," Nick suggested.

Veronica nodded. "Or simply make an appearance from that other world to hand over the art."

*That other world.* The very thought of it seemed to Lily like a great place to be. *Where you could paint and enjoy yourself, and no one would know you were there.*

When it was time to return to work, Lily walked past Nick's easel. His sketchpad was open and he had done several studies of the model, but he'd incorporated her into his picture, which was of a party scene, under a canopy of trees, hung with red lanterns.

Lily's jaw dropped. "How could you know?" she asked.

"Know what?"

"This is practically a duplicate of my picture. The one I'm doing on the mural."

Nick cocked his head to study his sketch. "It just popped into my head." He grinned at her. "Maybe I'm reading your mind."

"I guess it's possible," Lily said, shaking her head in amazement. "I mean, the people and the party are so real to me that maybe I'm projecting them to the world." She shot a quick glance at Phil's easel to see if he was picking up on her "transmission". He wasn't. Neither was any other student in the room. *Just Nick. Strange, mysterious Nick.*

When class ended, Nick agreed to meet Lily the next day, when she would begin painting the mural. Lily wondered if they had somehow discussed plans to work together, but realized they hadn't. Yet it seemed perfectly natural that he would help her with the work.

That afternoon she took the subway uptown to pick up her check from the city for the first half of her honorarium. Two hundred and fifty dollars! Lily had never had so much money in her life and didn't dare carry it in her bag. She pinned the envelope inside her T-shirt and, though it was sweltering, pulled a sweatshirt over top of that. Even with all of those precautions she was nervous.

*Where is this train?* She thought as she stood waiting on the platform for the IRT.

Lily's plan was to go straight to the bank in her neighbourhood, cash the cheque, buy paint, and hide the rest of the money in her room.

Finally she heard the familiar low rumble from deep in the dark subway tunnel. All eyes turned as the train's headlights emerged. A voice over the station's loudspeakers announced, "This is the IRT Downtown Express. Making express stops only."

Dozens of people crowded together in front of the train's many doors. When they opened, passengers fought their way off the train before the waiting passengers could rush in and look for a seat.

Lily felt like a sardine squeezed in a tin. Pushed by other sweaty bodies, she was literally lifted into the car. Inside, she quickly looked round. No free seats. *Typical.* Worse yet, the air conditioning wasn't working. The car was as hot as a sauna.

A chime rang and the doors closed, trapping Lily and the others inside. They waited for the train to begin its slow exit from the station. In a few moments it was speeding down the darkened tracks.

*At least the speed creates a little wind,* Lily thought. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the breeze. In her mind she pictured Nick, waiting for her at the corner by MIVA.

Without warning, the train slowed to a stop. A few people looked at each other, but no one seemed to know what had caused the halt. Most of the

riders, familiar with the erratic record of the city's transit system, were content to read their newspapers or nap.

A few minutes went by before the conductor came on the intercom speaker. "Ladies and gentlemen, we're being held here for a few minutes. We're waiting for the train ahead of us to leave the next station. We should be back underway shortly. We appreciate your patience. And have a good day."

*How can I have a good day when I'm stuck here!*

A commotion in the next car caught her attention. Glancing through the glass-topped doors linking the two cars, Lily saw Hero and a couple of other Lucifers harassing a passenger there.

*Where's a transit cop?* She frantically looked to the other door. *They're never here when you need one.*

She looked back at the other car. Hero was heading her way!

The car was so crowded there was no place to hide. He'd see her for sure!

Lily tried to squeeze her way towards the front but it was slow going.

*Come on! Start the train!*

Behind her she heard the door to the car bang open. She heard the heavy clump of the gang's combat boots on the floor. She heard people saying, "Hey, watch where you're going!" and then apologizing to the Lucifers for saying anything at all.

Lily found a place against the closed side door. Quickly she yanked a newspaper from a sleeping passenger's lap and buried her head in it.

*Walk past me! Please don't stop!*

But the boots stopped.

"Well, well," Hero said. "I wonder who's hiding behind the morning news? Come out, come out, whoever you are."

Her hands shaking, Lily held the newspaper high. *Someone help me! Someone!*

Hero smashed the newspaper to the floor. "I thought it was you."

"Leave me alone," she pleaded.

"I gave Rosa one more chance," he said. "And I'll do the same for you."

"What about Rosa?" she asked.

"She saw the light, your little sister did," Hero said. "She's doing a little job for me, to prove her loyalty."

Lily hated him. "You're nothing but a—"

"I'm doing the talking here," he interrupted. "You don't want to get me mad. I'm not a very nice guy when someone makes me mad. Like you did the other night."

Ignoring all the other people, Hero put his hands on Lily's waist and pulled her close. She tried to squirm away but his grip was too strong.

"Let me go," she pleaded.

"Why should I?" Hero glanced at the other passengers who were trying desperately to mind their own business. "They aren't going to help you."

Suddenly, the train began to move.

"When we reach the next station," Hero told Lily, "you're coming with us."

"What for?" Lily rasped.

"You're going to take me to your place and give me back what is mine."

*The cap!* Lily had hidden it on the roof. She wished she'd never touched the horrible thing.

The train rattled towards the next station. It was the longest few minutes of her life. As the train slowed, the passengers prepared to exit. Hero spun Lily towards the door, still tightly holding on to her waist.

When the doors opened, Lily tried to pull away, but Hero yanked her back. "Don't even try it," he said. "I have a gun. I'll use it."

He led her towards the stairs leading up to the street.

"Go on," he pushed as she resisted. "Upsy-daisy!"

She headed up the steps, too frightened to scream. Too frightened, knowing what he might do if she did.

Out of nowhere, someone bumped into Hero.

"Hey, what the—?" Hero bellowed. "Who did that?"

He lost his grip, and Lily pushed him away as hard as she could. He fell backwards and Lily raced up the stairs, towards the light. Lily turned back to see Hero lying at the bottom. An old man, dressed in several layers of shabby clothing and a dark coat, was leaning over him, trying to help Hero to his feet.

"I'm terribly sorry," the old man was saying. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

"Let go of me, you crazy old man!" Hero said, pulling his hands away.

The old man looked up – and seeing Lily, he winked.

*Thank you,* Lily thought. She was certain the old man would somehow hear her. Then she turned and ran down the street as fast as she could.

Her encounter with Hero had left Lily badly shaken. She forced herself to go into the bank and cash the cheque. But when she reached her favourite hardware store off Canal Street, she couldn't bring herself to go inside. After what had happened, Lily found that she couldn't concentrate on what supplies she needed for the mural. *I just want to go home. I'll buy the paint when I'm in a better state of mind.*

From inside the store a male voice boomed, "Hey! Stop!"

Lily looked up and saw her sister bolt out of the hardware store.



"Stop! Thief!" a man shouted after her.

Clutching an object against her chest with her good arm, Rosa darted into the street – and was nearly hit by an oncoming truck.

"Watch where you're going!" the driver shouted, angrily sounding his horn.

Not stopping, Rosa reached the other side of the street and ran down the block.

"Rosa, wait!" Lily crossed the street in pursuit.

Whatever Rosa had stolen must have been heavy because she was having trouble keeping her balance.

"Rosa, for God's sake!" Lily puffed, when she finally caught up with her. "You take back whatever you lifted!"

"And get arrested?" Rosa said, breathing hard. "No way."

"What's so important that you had to steal it?" Lily demanded. "Come on, show me!"

Rosa opened her arm. She was holding a large can of kerosene.

Lily was mystified. "Don't tell me you're having a cook-out in Central Park," she said.

"It's not for me."

Lily frowned. "Who are you stealing for?"

Rosa responded with stony silence.

Then it hit Lily. What do you do with kerosene? Start fires. Fires that could burn buildings. *Warehouses!*

Lily tried to pull the can away from Rosa. But her sister bent forward, refusing to give it up. "Rosa, please, don't do this. Let me take it back. Don't do this."

"I'm doing this for you," Rosa hissed.

"For me?" Lily was totally confused.

"Hero said he'd kill you if I didn't help him with his next job," Rosa said. "What else could I do?"

"Oh, god, Rosa," Lily moaned. "Don't do this for me. It's not worth it. I can take care of myself."

Rosa stared at Lily. Both girls had tears in their eyes.

Finally Rosa handed over the can. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I'll take that stuff back," Lily said. "I'll tell the shop owner you dropped it when you ran past me."

Rosa rubbed her shoulder which was still sore and looked again towards the corner. "One way or another I'm going to have to get that kerosene."

"Stay away from him," Lily hissed. "Do you hear me? Just stay away from him."

"I can't avoid Hero," Rosa said, sadly. "Everywhere I turn, there he is. And if it's not him, it's another Lucifer. There's no escape."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*There's a great deal of planetary activity in your fourth house of family, home and community. The future is crowding in on the present. The question is not how or where you reside today, but where you intend to live in the future, how you want to live, and with whom you will share your home.*

The next morning, Lily did not go to class. She couldn't bring herself to leave the house. Every time she stepped outside, disaster seemed to strike. She sat in her room and stared at the cans of paint which she had eventually purchased the previous day, wanting to heave them through the wall.

*Slam!*

Lily tensed as she heard the front door crash shut.

"I don't care if Rosa is your daughter," Danny was shouting at Stormy as they entered the apartment. "I've had it with her! Either she goes or I go!"

"Danny, you don't expect me to kick my own daughter out," Stormy tried to reason. "She's only fourteen years old."

"You made your choice," he replied. "I'll move out first thing in the morning."

"Danny, no!" Stormy pleaded. "Not that!"

Listening to her mother begging that pig of a person to stay made Lily ill. What was the matter with her family? Why would Stormy need someone like Danny in her life?

"I'm warning you," Danny continued. "If that worthless piece of trash comes back here, I'm letting her have it."

"Please, Danny, I'll talk to Rosa. I'll make her promise never to steal money from you again."

Lily moved to the door. Her sister had taken money from Danny? What for?

She remembered something Rosa had said after Lily convinced her to return the stolen can of kerosene. "One way or another, I'll have to get it for him."

"Oh, god!" Lily leant her head against the door. *Rosa stole money to buy kerosene for Hero.*

Lily had to get the cap. The one she'd hidden in the chimney on the roof. *That would solve everything. Rosa would give it back to Hero and he'd leave*

*them alone.* Lily threw open the bedroom door and came face to face with Danny, who was angrily swigging a beer.

"What are you looking at?" he demanded.

"Nothing," she said, staring him in the eye. "I'm looking at a big, fat nothing."

Lily dashed out of the apartment and up the stairs to the roof.

Usually the open air and view of all the rooftops comforted her, but not this time. Today, seeing the rooftops lined with TV antennas, clotheslines, old couches and crumbling brick walls only made her more depressed.

To make matters worse, the brick that covered her secret hiding place was lying on the tarmac beside the chimney. The winged Lucifer cap was gone. Lily put both hands to her temples, trying to quell the rising fear inside her.

"There, there, my pretties," a voice murmured melodically from behind Lily. "There's food enough for all of you."

Lily had thought she was alone. She spun round and saw hundreds of birds fluttering in a circle round a woman on the roof of the adjoining building. The woman looked as if she had stepped out of the nineteenth century, in her long grey skirt with its bustle and a matching puff-sleeved jacket. Her blouse was pink and had a frilly ruffle at the neck. On top of her head sat a large straw hat. Perching everywhere – on her shoulders, her hat, the chimneys and wall surrounding her - were white pigeons.

The woman saw Lily and waved. "Hello!"

Lily was too stunned to speak. This woman, clearly from another time, was the third face she had drawn on her sketchpad. The lady from her painting.

"Isn't life glorious?" the woman laughed. She raised one finger, on which perched a tiny white bird. "There's beauty in the smallest thing."

"I see that," Lily managed to choke out.

"Do you?" The woman pulled a handful of birdseed from a white canvas bag and tossed it high in the air. The birds swirled up in a spiral of feathers above the lady. "If you can't find that beauty – create your own."

Lily tilted her chin back and felt her whole spirit fly up with the birds as they soared high into the air. When she looked back across the rooftop the lady was gone.

"It's official," she murmured as she shuffled across the roof. "I've lost my mind. I'm not only drawing people from paintings but I'm seeing and talking to them, too."

In a giddy state of shock, Lily reeled back to the apartment and grabbed her trolley full of paint. "If you can't find beauty," she announced to Danny,

who was sitting in the torn recliner in front of the television, "create your own!"

He shot her an angry, "What's that supposed to mean?" look, but Lily only laughed. There was a kind of freedom in knowing you were crazy. She actually giggled to herself the entire four blocks to her mural. When she reached the vacant lot, she let go of the trolley and cried out with delight.

As if by magic, strings of red paper lanterns had appeared, criss-crossing the entire dirt lot. A table, covered in a red-checked tablecloth, sat off to one side. On top of it a wine bottle held a candle.

"I think I am most definitely crazy," she cried, clapping her hands together. "Either that, or this is some delicious dream."

"It is no dream, *mademoiselle*," Nick said, appearing from the shadows of the vacant building. "Zis is Paris, France!"

"Oh, Nick!" Lily ran on to the lot. On closer inspection, the table was actually a fruit crate covered in a worn red check flannel shirt and the wine bottle an old soda bottle, but the lanterns were real. Very faded and patched with masking tape, but real. "This is so romantic."

"An artist, she needs the beautiful work space, if she is to make *la magique – n'est-ce pas?*" Nick said, in an exaggerated French accent.

Lily shook her head and sighed. "It is truly beautiful."

From out of nowhere, Nick produced a smart derby hat, which he set at a rakish angle on his head. Then he clapped his hands. The little ragamuffin girl emerged from the shadows at the edge of the lot, clutching a cassette player. She sat cross-legged on a pile of blankets and pressed a button. Accordion music filled the afternoon air.

Nick held out his hands. "Would you care to dance?"

"It's a waltz," Lily murmured. "I don't know how."

"Nonsense," Nick said. "It's easy. One, two, three. One, two, three. Down, up, up. Down, up, up."

Lily bent her knees and went up on her toes, following his instructions. Then Nick took her in his arms, and they began to dance beneath the strings of lanterns.

"How did you know I'd even show up?" she asked, after they'd circled the dusty lot several times.

"I took my chances," he said. "I figured sooner or later you'd come. And here you are."

Lily and Nick waltzed for what felt like hours, only stopping when the music ran out. Lily turned to thank the little girl but she had vanished.

"How do they do that?" she whispered, half to herself.

"Magic," Nick replied. "And now that our mood is set, and we are imagining ourselves in a perfect world where everyone is happy and everything is beautiful - what do you say we get to work on the mural?"

Lily looked back at her wall, where she had laid out her drawing with chalk. The glare of the safety light at the corner illuminated the mural wall as brightly as if it were a stage. She was suddenly hit with the overwhelming need to create this beautiful world. "Let's start now. And not waste another second."

The two opened the paint cans, stirred the colours and, following Lily's sketch, began. They painted all afternoon and well into the night. They found things to laugh about, things to prompt philosophical discussions. They were delighted by each other's talent. Sometimes they found they had no need to talk and painted in silence. It was nearly two in the morning when they decided to rest. The rough colour section of the outdoor urban ball was almost finished.

"So what do you think is on the other side?" Nick asked as they sat down at the makeshift table and admired their handiwork.

"The other side?" Lily repeated. "You mean, the other side of the wall?"

He shook his head. "I mean, the other side of the painting."

"Nick, do you need some sleep?" Lily asked feeling his forehead.

"I'm serious. Imagine what's on the other side of this painting. What's beyond this outdoor scene?"

"What we *think* is there?" she wondered. "Or what we would *like* to be there."

"I'll go first," he volunteered. "I see light. A world of light. I see fields surrounding this village where people are dancing. I see a stream, clean and cool, bubbling over pink, grey and green stones. Your turn."

In her mind's eye, Lily pictured the world beyond the painting. "Over the stream, I see a small footbridge. It leads to a stone cottage – built by hand," she said. "It has green shutters, and window boxes of purple and yellow flowers. And the young couple who live there grow their own food in a garden ringed with tall sunflowers."

"They drink water from a well," Nick added. "Cool, clear, unpolluted water. And beyond the cottage is a field of wild flowers."

Lily's eyes were shining. "And next to that field is a barn. Downstairs lives a goat that provides them with milk. But upstairs—"

"Is an art studio," Nick breathed. "Where the beautiful young woman goes to paint. It's big and open and airy."

"And look!" Lily gasped. "There's a big, friendly golden retriever lazily wagging his tail in the stable door as the husband, a dark-haired young man, comes in."

"He's carrying a wicker basket with cheese and wine and fresh baked bread." Nick took Lily's hand.

Lily squeezed it hard. "They're going to follow the brook into the woods. They'll spread the red-and-white checked tablecloth on the forest floor and—"

Lily put a hand to her face. It felt flushed. The fantasy seemed so real, it was almost frightening.

"I'd better get home," she said, returning to the present.

Nick blinked several times. He too looked like he had been transported to another place. Nick took a deep breath and nodded. "I'll walk you."

Lily and Nick carefully unstrung the fragile red lanterns. Then they folded up the check shirt, placing it back in the "free" box by the sidewalk, along with the cracked white candle. The mural site returned to a dingy city corner.

They walked quietly to Lily's building.

The air was cool and refreshing. For once, the city night was not pierced by the sound of sirens and arguments and blaring car radios. At her door, Nick kissed Lily good night and held her hand, until she finally pulled herself away and disappeared into her building.

Upstairs, at her bedroom window, Lily looked down. Nick waited below, like a sentry guarding her from harm.

"You be careful," she murmured. Lily turned from the window and was immediately confronted by Rosa's empty bed.

"Little sister," Lily whispered, pressing her hand against the rumped pillow. "Where are you?"

Lily lay on top of the bed covers, trying to remember every moment of her perfect evening. She fell asleep, dreaming of their world of light.

In the morning when she woke, Lily was no longer quite sure if any of it had actually happened, or if it had just been a wonderful dream.

## CHAPTER NINE

*Saturn casts a pall on your solar sixth house. You feel that something is being taken away, something that belongs specifically to you and you alone. You can balance the good with the bad. Libra – you're used to doing that. Try to plant the seeds of harmony in your mind.*

"Where's the hunk?" Kit whispered the next day at art class.

"I don't know." Lily was worried. "I know he planned to be here."

The little chime rang, cueing the model at the front to change positions, but Kit didn't even notice. She was too interested in Lily's private life.

"So where'd you meet him?"

Lily paused with her charcoal in the air. She wasn't sure what to tell Kit. She had seen him several times before she'd actually met him. On the street before the explosion, in art class, and finally on the street near her building, when the Lucifers had jumped her. She didn't feel up for long explanations, so she replied simply, "On the street."

"Whoa," Kit giggled. "Where's this street? If all the guys are as good-looking as Nick, I think I'll go take a little stroll there."

*Yeah. And get yourself killed.*

"Ahem." Veronica cleared her throat, signalling to Kit that she didn't appreciate her talking during class.

Lily was glad Veronica had silenced Kit. She was too worried to chat.

Lily thought about Nick during the entire two hours of class, but said nothing to Veronica. The teacher didn't ask about Nick, either. She seemed to have something else on her mind. *Maybe she's found out about Nick's connection to the Lucifers.* Several times, Lily went outside the building to look for him. But he was nowhere to be found.

*I hope he's all right. Maybe we got our signals crossed. Maybe he thinks we're meeting at the mural.* She had no way of getting in touch with him. They'd never exchanged phone numbers. She had no idea where he lived. And the New York phone book had columns and columns of the surname Santos.

A million thoughts raced through Lily's mind. One by one they turned sour. She couldn't stand it any longer. She had to talk to someone. So, right after class, she grabbed Veronica in the hall.

"Do you know anything about Nick?" Lily asked. "Do you know where he is?"

"Lily, you have yourself to worry about," Veronica said sincerely. "Now you're responsible for the mural. Are you sure you want to take on Nick's problems too?"

"I'm not taking on his problems," Lily said sharply. "He's a friend. I'm worried about him."

"I'm sorry," Veronica apologized. "I'm just – I'm trying to get a straight word out of the city about the mural."

Lily was stunned. "What about the mural?"

"There seems to be a disagreement about the building. I'm getting mixed messages. One person says it's the right building, the other says no one had the right to give permission to paint that building."

Lily couldn't believe her ears. "Say that again."

"Some permits got misfiled – I don't know, something went wrong." Veronica threw up her hands. "I do know we won't be able to get any supplies

until it's straightened out. But city government is like a monster with its own mind, and—"

"I - I've already started," Lily sputtered. "I mean, I've done more than start — I've created the whole world of the painting. I used the first half of my pay cheque to buy paint and brushes, and—"

"I'm sorry, Lily," Veronica cut in. "I don't know what to say."

"Should I keep going?" Lily was trying hard to keep her chin from quivering.

Veronica ran both hands through her hair in frustration. "I don't know. Yes. I guess so. Until I find out what exactly is going on."

Lily's day went from bad to worse after she left MIVA. Rosa was waiting for her outside.

She had a black eye and her mouth was swollen. "Did Hero do that to you?" Lily demanded.

"No," Rosa mumbled through her bruised mouth. "Danny."

"Danny beat you up?" Lily asked.

Rosa nodded. "He called me a thief. I told him he owed me, and that I was reporting him to the police for dislocating my shoulder. Man, he went crazy! If Stormy hadn't been there to stop him, I'm sure he would have killed me."

"Stormy rescued you?" Lily was surprised. "Maybe she's come to her senses."

"Don't get your hopes up," Rosa interrupted. "Five minutes later, she was blaming it all on me and letting that jerk off the hook. It was disgusting. She begged him to stay. She promised to kick me out if he'd give her another chance."

Rosa wiped her eyes. She looked so young.

"I'll go to the police with you," Lily said, putting her arm round her sister. "I should've done it the night he hurt your shoulder."

"Don't bother, Lily," Rosa said. "I'm leaving."

"But where will you live?" Lily said.

"The street, if I have to," Rosa said defiantly.

Lily thought of the money from the mural. After she finished the painting and received the second payment, there might be enough money for them both to leave. "Wait," Lily said. "For a little while longer. Until I finish the mural."

"I can't go back home."

"Then stay with a friend. What about Carly?"

Rosa shook her head. "Her mother kicked her out of the house last week. And Maria's mom said she can't hang round with me any more."



Lily's head was starting to ache. "Isn't there anybody? Like Tiffany. She's always coming to our house. Why can't you stay at her place?"

"They've got six kids in their family and a one bedroom apartment." Rosa waved one hand. "No way."

Lily put her hands on her hips. "There's got to be someone who will let you stay at their house. I mean, even Mrs. Velasquez would probably say yes. If she knew it was only temporary."

Rosa wrinkled her nose. "Her place smells."

Lily threw up her hands in frustration. "Geez, Rosa. You are not making this easy. We'll talk to Mrs. Velasquez and that's it."

"OK, OK, don't shout." Rosa looked nervously over one shoulder, then the other, towards the streets approaching the art institute.

"Why are you so jumpy?" Lily asked. "Danny is not going to follow you here. He's too much of a slug."

"It's not Danny I'm worried about," Rosa said. "It's Hero. He wants that cap and he's not going to give up till he gets it."

Lily raised one hand. "I swear I don't have it. I did. But someone found my secret hiding place and took it."

Rosa took Lily's arm. "Could we just get inside? I don't like being out in the open like this."

"All right," Lily replied. "We'll take the subway home. Then we'll talk to Mrs. Velasquez."

Rosa touched her swollen lip once more and winced. "Let's hurry. I don't think I can take any more beatings."

Waiting with Rosa in the subway station, Lily tried to figure out what to do. The remainder of her five-hundred-dollar cheque could get both of them out of town. *But where? And then what?* She could turn Danny in to the police to get him out of the apartment - but what would that do to Stormy? *And what about Nick? And the mural?*

Lily's head was pounding. Her problems seemed overwhelming. She closed her eyes and tried to recreate the image of the world beyond the mural. The cottage where she and Nick lived. Their studio nearby. Their garden.

"Some weirdo is waving at us," Rosa said, interrupting Lily's thoughts.

"What?" Lily snapped back to reality. "Did you say something?"

Rosa pointed across the tracks to the other platform. "Over there. That guy is waving at us." She squinted at him. "He looks familiar. He's not bad-looking."

"It's Nick!" Lily cried with joy.

Nick was waving his arms and shouting. But it was impossible to hear him as an express train rushed through the station without stopping.

Lily jumped off the bench, trying to glimpse Nick through the windows of the train rushing by.

After the last car passed, Nick raised his fist to the side of his face as if he were listening to an imaginary telephone. Then he gestured for Lily to look towards the end of the platform where there was a public phone. Then he pointed to the phone booth on his side.

Lily darted through the milling crowd to the phone booth. She read the numbers off the dial and, in sign language, gave Nick the seven-digit code for her phone. He gave her a thumbs-up sign.

Moments later her phone rang. Lily picked up the receiver and looked across the tracks at Nick. "Nick, I'm so glad to see you. You don't know how worried I was when you didn't show up at MIVA."

"I'm sorry," his voice rumbled in her ear. "I was having a little talk with the police."

She had to plug her free ear to keep out distracting noise. "The police?" she repeated, not sure if she had heard correctly.

"The police," he said. "Lily, I want a new life. With you. And there's only one way for me to ever get free of the streets."

"What did you do?" Lily asked, feeling hopeful and terrified.

"I told the cops I'd testify against Hero and the Lucifers," Nick said. "But they need you to come forward too, Lily. To tell them what you saw the day of the explosion."

"And then what?" she asked.

"The police said, if I cooperate, that they'd help relocate me to another state," Nick said. "I'm hoping you'll come with me, Lily. We can make a fresh start. Together."

"What about Rosa?" Lily said, looking at her sister standing outside the booth, gingerly feeling her bruised face. "Can she come, too?"

Nick laughed. "Sure. The more the merrier!" Lily could tell by his voice that he was relieved and happy.

Lily wanted to tell him how she felt about him. She wanted to say nothing mattered as long as they were together. But she wasn't able to. Because suddenly Rosa was shouting in her ear, "Oh, no! Look across the tracks!"

To her horror, she saw Hero and the Lucifers coming down the stairs.

"Nick!" she screamed into the phone. "Run!"

She was answered by the loud clunk of the phone hitting the side of the booth.

Nick was halfway up the exit stairs when Hero spotted Rosa. Over the roar of the incoming train, he screamed, "You're history!"

"Hurry, Rosa!" Lily grabbed her sister's hand and bolted for the train. The doors slid open and they leapt inside. The girls ran to the back of the car, never taking their eyes off the Lucifers, standing on the platform across the track.

As the train pulled out of the station, Lily held Rosa's hand tightly. It was ice cold. "We'll go as soon as we can, Rosa. I promise."

## CHAPTER TEN

"You come right in and make yourself at home," Mrs. Velasquez said, after Lily explained their situation that evening. "I must be frank – I never liked that Danny fellow. I think Stormy has a blind spot about him. But..." Mrs. Velasquez shrugged. "She's a Gemini. She'll do anything to keep a man in her life. Anything."

"She makes me sick," Rosa grumbled, as she carried her small suitcase of belongings into Mrs. Velasquez's apartment. The room was clean but cluttered with books, carved figurines and yellowing photos of Mr. Velasquez from before he fell ill and lay in their back bedroom all day. The whole place had a distinct odour.

Rosa wrinkled her nose at Lily. "Cat box," she whispered as a large black cat inched through the doorway and crouched at the edge of the faded oriental carpet, watching them.

Mrs. Velasquez wagged a finger at Rosa. "Your mother can't help the way she is. She has Neptune afflicted in her chart, which means that she's likely to have severe mental and emotional problems."

"I'll say," Rosa muttered, rubbing her eye.

"I'm going to put something on that eye of yours," Mrs. Velasquez told Rosa, "and make you a cup of herbal tea."

Lily stood up. "Listen, I have to go to the mural."

Rosa frowned. "Are you crazy? Hero is out there. You could get hurt."

Lily was adamant. She had the strong feeling that her future was tied to the successful completion of her painting. "Rosa, if I finish this job, they'll pay me. Then you and I can buy bus tickets and leave."

"Where will you girls go?" Mrs. Velasquez asked.

"Stormy has a sister upstate," Lily replied. "I think we'll go there first and then see what happens."

Mrs. Velasquez walked over to Lily and cupped her hand under her chin. "You girls are so young to have such big worries. My heart breaks for you."

Lily smiled at the grey-haired lady. "Thank you for helping us. Now I'd better go and work on my painting."

Mrs. Velasquez clapped her hands together. "Spoken like a true Libra. Go. Make art. Make our world more beautiful." As Lily hurried to the door Mrs. Velasquez called out a warning. "Just be a little careful when you're out there."

Lily hurried to the mural site, pulling her trolley full of half-empty cans of paint. She made sure she followed the most populated route. Nick wasn't there when she arrived, but a ladder was. He'd left it with a note "I'm OK. I've asked my friends to keep an eye on you. But watch your back."

Lily read the note and turned to look across the dirt lot. Sure enough, on the nearest corner, pushing a shopping trolley filled with old clothes and blankets, was the kind old man. Sitting on a bench by the far corner she thought she could see a woman in a long skirt, feeding pigeons. Where was the little girl? She peered into the shadows of the surrounding buildings. Lily couldn't see her, but felt certain she was there.

Lily painted all afternoon and into the evening. Beneath the bright glare of the safety light she was barely aware of the change from day to night. Working on the top of a ladder, she didn't stop for as much as a sip of water. She worked furiously, as if possessed by the world she was creating.

More and more people from the neighbourhood stopped to watch. A few left money.

"You're very talented," a woman said, putting a few dollars in her trolley.

"It makes me proud to live on this block," an old man with a cane added. "Thank you."

The compliments made Lily feel wonderful.

But nothing lifted her spirits like seeing Nick. When he appeared she clambered down off her ladder and rushed to meet him.

"Are you all right?" she asked, patting his shoulders and arms, touching his face.

"I'm fine." He laughed, catching hold of her hands and pressing them between his. "Next time I may not be so lucky, but today, I'm fine."

"Next time." Lily frowned. "I don't like the sound of that. Nick, we need to leave – soon."

He nodded. "I was thinking somewhere west of here."

"You mean like New Jersey?"

"Oh, no, no, no." He shook his head. "The Wild West. Colorado, or Montana. Where the air is clean and there's room to live."

Lily gestured to the mural. "Somewhere like our world? With a cottage and a well, and a studio for painting?"

Nick slipped his arm round her waist as the two of them looked up at the wall. "With a field full of wild flowers."

"And there will be no gangs," Lily added. "No hate."

"Our days will be filled with gardening and painting—"

"And picnics," Lily giggled.

Nick pulled her close to him. "We'll find a place where people are able to live happily ever after."

Lily closed her eyes and placed her cheek on his shoulder. "I like that place. Let's go there. Soon."

He chuckled. "It's a deal."

Lily thought of Rosa, her bag packed and ready, hiding in Mrs. Velasquez's apartment. Of Hero and his gang roaming the streets spreading hatred and fear. And of Danny, the epitome of all that was ugly about this world.

"I mean it, Nick," she said, suddenly feeling very anxious. "I think we need to go very soon. Maybe I should forget about the second payment. Maybe we should just take what money we have and leave tomorrow."

"But you have to finish your picture," he said. "Look how much happiness it's brought already to the people round here. Mr. Fong, the vegetable man. Mrs. Ruiz and her aging mutts. You have to finish it – if only to leave it behind as a glimpse of how life could, how it should be." His eyes shone with a fierce intensity as he spoke. "We'll do it together."

Lily clutched Nick's hand and looked up at her picture. Hope tiptoed into her heart like a small sliver of light. Maybe – just maybe – life would turn out all right.

They embraced. Lily could feel the warmth of Nick's skin underneath his T-shirt.

"Now come on," he murmured into her ear, sending electrical charges down her spine. "Let's get back to work."

They worked side by side through the evening, with Lily on the ladder and Nick balanced on a stack of milk crates and wooden boxes.

By midnight they had finished the background of stars and planets, and comets with rainbow tails soaring across the sky.

Lily worked on the salsa band. She added the old man from the street playing a squeeze-box, the pigeon woman playing a violin, and the little street urchin shaking a tambourine.

Nick added details to the dancing couples. He made them full of love, and laughter.

It was as if they were working by telepathy. For everything that Nick painted, Lily loved. And everything that Lily did, Nick said was inspired.

It was nearly three in the morning when Nick stretched his arms and yawned. "I need to take a break."

"Me too." Lily climbed down her ladder and jogged on the spot. "I think my toes fell asleep."

The two admired their handiwork as they did side stretches and knee bends. Nick pointed his paintbrush to the male and female figures standing by the gazebo. "What are you going to do with them?" he asked.

"It hasn't come to me yet." Lily cocked her head to look at the couple in the gazebo. "But it will."

"Well," Nick said, dropping his brush into a bucket of paint thinner. "They can wait till tomorrow. I'm ready to call it a night."

"Me, too." Lily smiled wearily. "I'm exhausted. But my mind is going a million miles a second. I see so clearly how this picture will look when it's finished. I mean, I can envision more than just the picture, I can see the entire world beyond."

"I know." Nick looked back at the mural. "It's so...so real, it's eerie."

Lily took a deep breath and reached for the ladder. "I think we should keep going, while the picture is still in our head."

Nick caught hold of her elbow. "That picture will stay there. It's too powerful to forget. You need to give your body a rest."

They put their supplies back in Lily's trolley, hid the ladder in the abandoned building, then headed for Lily's apartment building.

Lily felt so happy, it frightened her. Nothing good had ever lasted in her life.

Nick must have read her mind because he said, "Lily, don't worry, it'll work out. We'll be together. Somehow. Somewhere."

"You think so?" she asked, looping her arm through his.

"It's our destiny," he said.

"Well, Romeo and Juliet were destined to be together," Lily said. "And look how their story ended."

"Tragic, I know," Nick said. "But, Lily, don't you believe Romeo and Juliet *are* together?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Sure, they both died in the play," he said. "But they were reunited in death. They're together for eternity, far from the world that never understood their love."

"Nick, you're giving me the creeps," Lily said with a shiver. "I know what you're saying, but it isn't exactly reassuring. Why can't we be happy in this world?"

"I hope we can," he said quietly. "I'm happy now."

Lily took Nick's hands and curled them round her back. She leaned forward to kiss him. "Me too," she whispered.

They embraced for a long time. As far as they were concerned, they were the only lovers in New York City.

Then they heard the low rumble of a car.

Lily saw it first, over Nick's shoulder. "Oh, god!" she screamed. "Run! Run!"

Nick turned his head and saw Hero and the Lucifers seated in the car. A moment later the engine roared, the tyres squealed, and the car shot forward.

Holding hands, Lily and Nick raced down the sidewalk.

"Come on," she screamed, "they're gaining on us!"

"Let go of my hand!" Nick ordered. "Go back to the mural. You'll be safe there."

"No!" Lily said. She tightened her grip. "Nick! Come on!"

But a second later, the car pulled level with them.

"Hear you're cutting a deal with the cops," Hero shouted through the open car window. "Not smart, Nick."

"Don't listen to them," Lily pleaded. "Keep running!"

Her lungs burning, her heart pounding, she ran as never before.

Then Lily heard a gunshot.

She felt Nick stumble beside her.

She felt his hand in hers start to loosen.

"Keep running!" she shouted.

But more and more she felt herself pulling him. He seemed to have lost his balance. She tried to yank him back to his feet.

"Lily," he uttered in an eerily small voice.

The car sped off and disappeared round the corner.

"Nick! No!" Lily screamed. She was still trying to pull him onward when he lurched forward, tumbling them both on to the sidewalk.

"No!" Lily screamed. "Oh, god – no!"

Lily scrambled to her knees and crawled back to Nick's motionless body. She cradled his head in her lap as she screamed and screamed for help. No one came.

"Nick! Nick. Nick."

She rocked him in her arms, back and forth, calling his name over and over as he bled to death in the street.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Losses are a natural part of growing, but loss of hope, loss of perspective, loss of love is never permitted, Libra. Swallow Saturn's lessons, and tuck them away in your heart.*

Nick was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital emergency room. For the doctors on duty, he was the third fatality that night. One woman trying to cross a busy street had been hit by car. A twenty-year-old man had been killed at a party that got out of hand. Just another city night during a summer heat wave.

But for Lily, Nick's death was not some simple statistic. It was devastation, the destruction of hope and love.

In shock, she wandered out of the hospital after saying goodbye to his lifeless body. She could not comprehend that Nick was dead. She wanted to believe his spirit was as restful as his body now seemed. She couldn't tell the doctors his address or phone number or even his father's name – because she had never learnt it herself.

Having no other place to go, Lily walked like a zombie back to the mural.

Unable to stem her grief, Lily collapsed to the ground. Her body heaved with heavy moans of sadness. She cried and cried, and thought she might never stop.

Her body shook and chills raced up and down her limbs. Finally Lily fell asleep. Partly from exhaustion. Partly because her mind needed to escape.

At first her dreams were murky and threatening. She felt herself crawling through a thick, confusing ooze. Faces – Hero, Stormy, Rosa, Kit, Nick – flashed at her like masks in a scary amusement park ride. She saw herself standing on subway tracks, waiting for a speeding train to hit her. She felt herself falling, falling, falling off the Empire State Building, and never reaching the ground. She raised her arms to cover her face, but her hands were gone.

Gradually, the dream became less frightening. She saw herself watching herself paint the mural.

Then she was floating in the world beyond the mural's urban ball. She stood barefoot in a field of wild flowers. A breeze gently rustled her soft cotton dress. Her arms and legs were bare, her hair loose and shiny.

She saw a dark-haired boy approach. *Nick?*

"Please, miss," the boy softly said. "Don't cry. You're safe here."

Lily touched her eyes and found them dry. "But I'm not crying," she said.

"I'm sorry you're so sad," the boy said.

"But I'm not sad," Lily told him.



The boy smiled. "Good." He stretched out his hand. "Come with me. Please."

In the dream, Lily felt herself taking the boy's hand. It was warm and soft.

He led her to a cottage near a brook. A garden of flowers and vegetables was full and colourful. Trees were round and green, laden with ripe fruit. A few soft clouds looked like puffs of joy in a perfectly blue sky.

"This is my home," the boy said. "I live here. My life is good now."

"It's all so beautiful," Lily said, spinning round. "Please let me stay with you."

"You have to go back," he said. "But I'll wait here for you."

"But I don't want to go back!" Lily protested. "I can't!"

The boy started to pull away from her without moving his feet. "Finish what you have to do," he said. His voice grew ever fainter. "You must finish your time. I'll wait."

"No!" Lily cried. "Don't go!"

"I'll be here when you've finished," the boy whispered. And then he was gone.

It was a homeless person going through a trash can that woke Lily. The person was throwing away whatever could not be sold. Something hit the ground near Lily – and half awake she reached for it to see what it was.

It was a broken miniature aeroplane. An old metal toy from the days before plastic. It looked like the planes that Lily had seen in movies about World War II.

Its wings were broken.

Lily cradled the broken toy and began to cry again. *Everything breaks. Nothing is safe.*

Lily reached down and felt a blanket that had covered her through the night. It was a baby blanket, soft and blue. Someone must have draped it over her while she slept.

"Excuse me," Lily said to the homeless person. "Did you give me this?"

The person – under all the clothes and grime it was impossible to know if it was a man or woman – examined the blanket for several minutes, assessing its worth. Finally the person said, "No. Can I have it?"

"Yes." Lily's head was pounding and her stomach ached. "Of course."

The person tossed it into a shopping trolley loaded with other possessions and shuffled away.

Lily's mouth felt dry and full of cotton. She looked down at her clothes. They were still stained with Nick's blood.

*Let me die, too.*

"Are you all right, miss?"

It was a man out walking his dog.

Lily stared at the stranger. "Do I know you?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I live round the corner. You're the artist. Right?"

"Artist?" Lily repeated. The word sounded as if it belonged to another language.

The man pointed up at the mural. "The painter doing that wall."

His dog began to sniff round Lily, but she didn't care.

"Yes," she said with a sigh. "I'm the muralist."

"I've checked your progress every time I take Marley here – that's my dog – out to do his business," the man continued. He didn't seem to mind Lily's appearance as long as she was willing to listen to his chatter. "I really like what you're doing here. I caught the homage to that French painter right away. Missy, that was inspired."

"Thanks," Lily murmured, trying to decide whether to stand or just lie back down in the dirt.

He took a moment to study the mural. "That's what ya call yer first-rate work," he concluded. "You got yourself a great future there, if I do say so myself."

Lily pulled herself to her feet. She needed a drink of water; something in her stomach.

"When do you plan on finishing?" the man continued to jabber.

"Finish?" she repeated. "I – I don't know. By the end of the week. Maybe."

"Good," he said. "You know, you're the best thing to happen to this neighbourhood in a long, long time."

"I am?" Lily asked, not sure if he was kidding.

"You're too busy painting, but you should see the smiles you bring to people's faces when they walk by."

She smiled. *I will finish*, she thought.

"Well, better get Marley home for his breakfast," the man said. He yanked the dog's leash and the dog finally stopped sniffing Lily. "Sorry about Marley. He doesn't get out much nowadays, neighbourhood being what it is."

Lily nodded. She wanted the man to leave.

"Oh, one last thing," he said. "I like the new touch on the mural."

"New touch?" Lily repeated.

"Yeah, that." The man pointed his hand up at the gazebo painted on the wall.

Lily's eyes followed his hand to the gazebo. What she saw caused her to nearly faint. "I – I didn't paint that," she said.

"Oh, don't be modest!" he said, walking off.

"But really, I didn't..."

It was no use. The man and his dog had disappeared round the corner.

Clutching her stomach, Lily turned her eyes towards the mural again. *What's happening to me? I'm definitely losing my mind.*

There, painted into the picture, standing near the gazebo, was Nick.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*As the moon moves heavily into Capricorn, you will probably want to cry. But remember, nothing lasts for ever and these aspects will soon pass. Wipe your eyes. You have work to do.*

All day Lily worked on the mural, until she could no longer hold a paintbrush. She couldn't remember having ever been so tired. But the mural gave her escape. It gave her a sense of purpose.

With the background completed, she had turned her attention to the village ball. The musicians were mostly done. Only a little detailing remained. She had spent the evening filling in the dancers and the spectators.

As she worked, she was very aware of Nick's friends, the street people, watching over her like angels. The old man with his shopping trolley stood guard at one corner of the empty lot while the woman watched from the other, surrounded by her circle of pigeons. Lily rarely saw the little girl but always sensed that she was there.

Before Nick was killed, he'd said, "Go back to the mural, you'll be safe there," and he was right.

The harder Lily worked the more she felt that somehow Nick was watching her, too. It was as if his presence was guiding her, or at least encouraging her. At times Lily could almost hear his voice murmuring in approval as she finished some new section of the mural.

She added some flowers to the bottom of the painting. *Perhaps one day a real garden will be planted at the base of the mural. And the real flowers will merge with my painted ones. So that a viewer won't know where reality ends and art begins.*

Before putting away her paints and brushes, she studied the image of Nick for a long time.

"Say something!" Lily whispered.

But the image remained silent.

Then an idea caused her to smile. "Maybe you'll get hungry in a little while," she said.

Lily moved the ladder into place and carried up her tray of supplies. On a table near the musicians she painted a grilled cheese sandwich, an order of French fries, and a glass of water. The meal that Nick had ordered their first night together. Remembering that diner and the waitress brought a smile to Lily's face.

She climbed down the ladder and put her supplies away. The mural seemed to glow in the New York night.

"Sleep well, my angel," she told Nick.

Then Lily went to find Rosa. Mrs. Velasquez met her at the door with open arms. She had already heard the news,

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she said, folding Lily into her arms. "Rosa came this afternoon to tell me and then she disappeared again."

Lily leaned her head against Mrs. Velasquez's shoulder. "I couldn't help him," she cried. "There was nothing I could do."

"There, there," said Mrs. Velasquez, her voice soothing and calm. "Sit down. Tell me what you're thinking, feeling – everything."

Lily sank into the overstuffed armchair, while Mrs. Velasquez pulled over a wooden chair from the dining table. The old woman took Lily's hand and held it.

"Last night I had a dream," Lily began. "I dreamt Nick was calling me from – you'll think I'm crazy – some world on the far side of the mural. Then I went there, and it was lovely. We were together – and safe. Then he told me I had to go back. Back to this world. Mrs. Velasquez, am I losing my mind?"

Mrs. Velasquez gave her a soulful smile. "Those of us who believe in astrology know there's only so much about the world that can be understood and explained. Astrology offers some answers, but not all. But certainly I believe that life here on earth can't be the only reality in the universe."

"Do you believe in other worlds?" Lily asked.

"I believe there are powers more mysterious and powerful than anything we small, temporary humans can grasp," Mrs. Velasquez said. "We only understand a fraction of how the universe functions. Who can say for certain that your dream was not a glimpse into some other world of light?"

"So I'm not crazy?" Lily wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"No, Lily, you're an artist," Mrs. Velasquez replied. "A *real* artist. And real artists, I believe, see more, feel more, understand more than the rest of us. A real artist uses her imagination to reach these other worlds."

Lily felt relieved and not so isolated. "Thank you."

Mrs. Velasquez poured Lily a cup of herbal tea. As they sipped the soothing liquid, she said, "This is a very difficult time for you Libras. The planets are showing a lot of unusual activity, which can be very disruptive. Not all of it is bad, mind you. There's a lot of good mixed in with the bad."

"Where's the good?" Lily asked.

"Well, I see a big change coming quite soon," Mrs. Velasquez said. "Maybe it's a move. Or maybe something to do with the mural. One thing for certain, as a Libra you'll want to control the wild swings going on in the cosmos. But, even with your strengths, it will be hard."

They finished their tea, and Mrs. Velasquez promised to get Rosa to call Lily the minute she returned. Lily trudged upstairs to her apartment. She could hear the television blaring in the living room, but she didn't go in there. Lily went straight to bed.

The events of the next day threw Lily dangerously off balance. It started when she woke to find Danny standing in her bedroom.

"What do you want?" she demanded, pulling the bedsheet over her body.

Danny didn't answer. He just grinned. He was wearing a torn T-shirt and boxer shorts. A dark stubble covered his face.

"Where's Stormy?" Lily asked.

"Who cares?" Danny replied, as he moved slowly towards her bed. "This is just between you and me."

Lily grabbed the lamp from the bedside table. "You take another step and I'll break this over your head."

"Hey!" Danny shrugged good-naturedly. "I just want to be your friend."

"Get out of my room," Lily ordered. "Or I'll call the police."

"Fine," he said, backing towards the door. "I can wait. I've got all the time in the world."

The door clicked shut behind him and Lily knew she would never be safe in her home again.

Lily could barely get dressed, her hands were shaking so badly. She managed to pull on a pair of black jeans and a T-shirt. Her only thought was to get out of that apartment. Away from that monster.

She quickly tossed as many clothes as she could into a suitcase and then hurried into the bathroom. Lily opened the medicine cabinet. It was loaded with Stormy's endless bottles of pills. Danny's dirty razor had the lower shelf all to itself. Lily emptied out her toiletries, adding them to her case.

She tiptoed into the living room, taking one last look round. There was nothing she wanted to take with her.

Lily hurried down the stairs, stopping to ring Mrs. Velasquez's doorbell. No answer. Rosa must not have come home.

There was really no place for Lily to go except to her mural.

She laboured all morning on the painting, concentrating on painting the dancing couples. Lost in her work, she could forget about Danny and Stormy and her whole ugly world.

Lily painted people from different cultures dancing with one another. She painted boys dancing with boys, and girls dancing with girls. She painted old people dancing with young people. She painted rich people dancing with paupers. She painted soldiers dancing with farmers.

She painted dogs dancing with cats. And cats dancing with mice stacked one on top of another. She painted a lion dancing with a lamb.

Here was life! Here was a world of light and goodness.

She painted until she literally ran out of paint.

*Now what? Do I spend the rest of my advance?*

After buying paint and brushes, Lily had hidden what was left of her first cheque – nearly ninety dollars – in a metal box. That was her escape money. Once she got the rest of her money, she planned to buy bus tickets out of New York for her and Rosa.

*I know. Go where they keep art supplies.*

She raced to MIVA.

*Veronica will find me some supplies.*

When Lily arrived, her art teacher was sitting at her desk. She wrapped her arms round Lily. "We're all so sorry about what happened," Veronica said, giving Lily a hug. "It's almost too horrible for words."

Lily couldn't reply. She was fighting back tears again.

"Lily, I really wish you would come back to class," Veronica continued. "I think it might help you through this very terrible time."

Lily had deliberately avoided the institute. She didn't want to deal with the stares and questions of the other students. How could someone like Kit, who lived in her comfortable cocoon on the wealthy Upper West Side, even begin to understand what Lily and her sister faced on a daily basis?

"I've got the mural to finish," Lily answered. "I'm putting all of my focus on that. I need my supplies so I can finish it."

"I went by the mural this morning," Veronica said, sitting back behind her desk. "You're doing splendid work. Given what happened, I found your likeness of Nick particularly haunting."

"But I didn't paint him there," Lily said. "Someone else must have."

"Who?" Veronica asked.

"I don't know," Lily replied.

There was a long pause. Then Veronica said, "I called city hall and talked to one of the mayor's top assistants. She assured me that she'd find out what the delay was on the supplies and get back to us in a day or two."

Lily's heart sank. "But I don't have a day or two. I need paint – now."

"This will all work out, if you're patient," Veronica said.

"I'm working day and night," Lily rasped. "Don't you understand? I have to finish that mural. Now. Today. I can't wait."

"Lily, settle down," Veronica said. "Getting upset isn't going to help matters."

But Lily couldn't stop herself. "I thought you were my friend!"

"Lily, go home," Veronica shot back. "You're stressed out. Stop working and find a nice air conditioned place to relax."

"Don't you get it? I can't go home," Lily screamed. "I've left home. I don't have anything in my life but that mural."

Veronica threw her arms in the air. "What am I supposed to do about that? I've tried to help you. I've done my best. Now you've got to help yourself."

Lily's shoulders slumped and she stood a long time staring in silence at Veronica. Finally she said in a barely audible voice, "You're not giving me any paint. Are you?"

Veronica avoided looking at Lily and turned her attention to some papers on her desk. "No, Lily. I'm not."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Time to a great leap forward. There are opportunities for recycling events, in a sense, and for additional gains from matters that you would ordinarily consider closed.*

***Brring! Brring!***

"Come on, answer the phone!" Lily had dialed Mrs. Velasquez's apartment once again, trying to reach Rosa. Every hour, on the hour, she'd

called from the booth on the corner, but no one was answering the phone. Lily hung up just as a car rumbled up to the curve behind her.

Lily froze, barely able to breathe. *Maybe it's a taxi dropping off a fare. Or a police car cruising the neighbourhood. Or maybe not.*

Afraid to turn round, Lily turned and stared through the telephone booth at Nick's image in her mural. He looked so happy. His hand was outstretched, as if beckoning her to join him.

The car behind her slowly approached. Lily's mind instantly replayed the drive-by shooting that had ended Nick's life.

*Go ahead. Kill me while I look at Nick.*

"Lily... here."

She felt a small tug at her elbow.

Turning round, Lily saw the scruffy little girl. She was holding several small cans of paint in her arms. The girl smiled.

Lily smiled back. "Thank you," she whispered.

"There's more," the girl said. "They're bringing it."

"They?" Lily asked. "The old man and the woman?"

The girl nodded. "Don't stop," she said. "We'll help you."

Lily reached down and took the paint, which she set on the ground. Then she leaned forward to embrace the girl.

She felt the girl's little body press against her. Lily closed her eyes and smiled.

And when she opened her eyes, the girl had vanished.

For the next few days, Lily did not stop to eat. She did not stop to rest. Hollow-eyed, she worked at the mural, stopping only to refill her paint cans.

Her eyesight was starting to fail from the strain. It was harder and harder for her to focus. To compensate, she moved closer and closer to the wall. As a result, the mural details became more and more defined.

She added designs to women's fingernail polish. She painted in the individual hairs on the men's moustaches. She added a grass stain to the knees of a child's trousers.

No one from city hall ever came round. It became very clear to Lily that they were never going to bring any supplies. But she didn't worry. Whenever Lily seemed about to run out of paint, another bucket appeared. She never saw the old man, woman, or girl. But she knew they were always near.

After a while she no longer heard the city behind her. She no longer knew if it was day or night.

Finally stopping for a sip of water, Lily studied her progress. Although a few places still bothered her, the mural was almost done. All that remained was the female figure standing next to Nick in the gazebo.



"Lily..." The voice belonged to Rosa. It sounded like an injured child's cry of help.

Lily turned round and saw her sister staggering towards her. Her clothes were torn. Her arms and legs were bloodied. She had been badly beaten.

Lily found the strength to take her sister in her arms. "Oh, Rosa," she moaned. "Not again."

"Hero nearly killed me," Rosa rasped. "He's crazy. He found out where I was staying. For days he called me with threats. Then this morning he broke into Mrs. Velasquez's apartment and went wild."

"Oh, my god," Lily cried. "Is she OK?"

Rosa shook her head. "They took her to the hospital and I ran." Rosa slumped to her knees in the dirt lot. "I can't go back there, Lily. I don't know what to do."

Lily knelt by her sister, putting her arm round her. "You can stay here with me."

"It's no good," Rosa sobbed. "Hero will find me. He'll kill us both. There's no way out. Not unless we get Hero first."

Lily led her sister to a spot marked by a broken bottle. There she dug up the small metal box containing her money. "I've saved what I could from my advance from the city and as soon as I finish the mural, they'll give me the rest and we can leave. I'm almost done."

*Beep! Beep!*

A yellow truck screeched into the dirt lot, barely missing Lily and Rosa. It pulled up to the mural and two city workers hopped out and started to erect wooden barriers in front of the building.

Still clutching her metal box, Lily raced across the lot shouting, "What are you doing? Stop!"

The workers didn't stop. One took a plastic-covered sheet of paper and nailed it into the mural wall.

"You're hurting my painting!" Lily screamed. "What are you doing?"

The worker looked at his crew mates and sighed. "Nobody warned us about a crazy," he muttered.

Lily jumped over the barrier and confronted the worker. "This is *my* mural!"

"Maybe so," the worker said with an indifferent shrug. "But hey, tomorrow the building is coming down."

"Coming down?" Lily said.

"That's right," he said. "Demolished. You should stick round and watch."

"Tomorrow?"

The man pointed to the notice nailed to the wall. "City permit for the demolition. By this time tomorrow the building will be nothing but a pile of bricks."

"But you can't!" Lily stormed. "I've put my whole life into that mural!"

"Miss, I'm sorry," the worker said. "But that's the way the cookie crumbles."

Lily's head was pounding. Her stomach was twisted in knots as she realized what this meant. No more supplies, and certainly no more money. What she'd hidden in her metal box was it.

Lily flung open the lid and counted the money. Eighty-nine dollars. Barely enough for one bus ticket.

She looked up at her sister, who was clutching her stomach and coughing clots of blood. In a flash, Lily made her decision.

"Rosa, here," she said, thrusting the money into her sister's hands. "Go to Port Authority bus terminal and buy yourself a ticket to Aunt Connie's."

"What about you?" Rosa said, having another coughing fit.

"Don't worry about me," Lily said. "Just promise you'll do what I say. And when you get there, I want you to dial this number." Lily scribbled the number of the corner pay phone on the edge of one of the dollar bills. "When I hear it ring, I'll know you're safe."

Rosa stared down at the money, then back at Lily.

"It's your only hope," Lily whispered.

Rosa nodded. "I'll do it."

Lily flung her arms round Rosa and the two sisters clung to each other, crying, scared of what the future held.

Lily tore herself free. "Now go," she said. "As fast as you can. Before Hero finds you."

Lily watched Rosa walk away down the street until she was out of sight. Only then did she look back into the metal box. To her complete surprise she found a small white envelope. Underneath it was a black cap with white wings on the front. A message was scribbled across the back of the envelope, which was addressed to her.

Dearest Lily,

If you find this note, and I am gone, please pass this and the hat (excuse me for removing it from your chimney but at the time it seemed necessary) on to the authorities.

My love, N.

Her heart racing, she opened the envelope. There was a letter inside addressed to the New York City Police Department.

I, Nick Santos, was responsible for the arson fire that destroyed the warehouse on Avenue C, between Third and Fourth Street. I was ordered to do it by Hero, the leader of the Lucifer gang. We were hired by the landlord, Howard Sampson, who wanted the insurance money. If you don't believe me, a girl named Lily Martinez found my gang cap at the scene. I've asked her to send it to you. Also, Hero kept records of his dealings with the landlord Sampson. You'll find them under a floorboard in his bedroom. You'll find one of Hero's guns there, too. This gun was used in a drive-by shooting. I hope you send him to prison. Me, I've already gone to a better place.

The letter was signed and dated the day that Nick was killed.

Lily carefully put the letter back in its envelope. Then she went to the nearest store and, with the two dollars she had left in her pocket, bought a large envelope and enough stamps to send the cap and letter to the police. As she dropped the letter into the slot at the post office, she murmured, "And justice will be served."

That night Lily worked late, until the mural was finished. Finished, that is, except for the figure next to Nick.

Lily was barely able to stand from hunger and fatigue. Her once shiny hair was dull and spotted with paint. Dark circles ringed her eyes.

Almost delirious, she stared at the mural. But Lily couldn't bring it into focus any more. The images whirled like lazy pinwheels of colour. She no longer knew what day it was – and she no longer cared.

"I want to be with you," she told the figures in the mural, "but I can't. Not until I know my sister is safe." Her body was shaking uncontrollably. She knew she was on the verge of total collapse.

Tomorrow, the building would come down. Taking with it her mural. The last evidence of Nick would be gone from the earth and all of Lily's work would add up to nothing.

Lily staggered to the side of the building, where she'd left her suitcase and a blanket, and crumpled like a rag doll to the ground.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In Lily's dream she saw the cottage nestled in the lovely countryside. She saw the old man painting outdoors in the garden. The woman and girl, now

wearing spring dresses with full, billowy skirts, were posing for him. Every so often, the woman and girl would take a break to enjoy a slice of freshly cut melon. The only noises were birds chirping, the sound of Lily's heart beating gently, and the strange flutter of wings.

Lily called to them. But they couldn't hear her.

Lily looked down at her feet, which were bare. She was wearing the soft flannel nightgown she'd been given for Christmas when she was eight years old. That was a Christmas when Stormy had a good job and money for presents. Miraculously, the nightgown still fitted her adolescent body.

*Am I dead? Is this the moment of light people supposedly see just before they pass on?*

The odd rustle of wings continued to rush against Lily's shoulders. And then she realized that they belonged to her. She had sprouted wings. However, hers were not full and lovely angel wings. They resembled those of a young bird leaving the nest for the first time.

Hovering unnoticed above the cottage, Lily saw Nick approaching from the nearby hill planted with fruit trees. He was carrying a basket of apples. He seemed both older and younger than Lily remembered him.

She called to him, but he did not hear her.

He carried the basket inside the cottage.

*Fly down and touch him,* Lily commanded her dream self. But her wings would not cooperate. She was like a hummingbird in flight, forced to observe only.

Nick left the cottage and walked over to where the old man was painting. The old man smiled, got up off his stool and gestured for Nick to take his place.

Removing the straw hat, Nick sat down. He took a brush and mixed several colours of oil paint together on a palette. Satisfied with the blend, he began carefully to apply the paint to the canvas.

The old man looked on approvingly. From time to time he offered Nick some advice, but mostly he watched the boy paint.

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind pushed Lily away. She tried to flap her wings, but they weren't strong enough to resist the wind. Then the wings disappeared, and Lily felt herself falling.

Waving her arms and legs wildly, she looked down and saw the cold, icy waters of New York harbour. Glancing up, she saw the Brooklyn Bridge. Below, a tugboat belched a warning.

Lily closed her eyes, certain she was about to die. The flat, deadly water rushed to meet her. But a barge loaded with garbage miraculously broke her fall.

Lily found herself lying in a heap of guns, broken bottles, crushed beer cans, video cassettes, fast-food wrappings, and sewage. Disgusted, she dug herself free, scrambled to her feet, and dived overboard.

Swimming towards the lower tip of Manhattan, she looked up at the Statue of Liberty. But instead of the famous image, she saw a pale green Stormy wearing the crown and holding high the shining torch.

"Mother!" Lily heard herself shout.

"I kicked Danny out!" Stormy said. "I'm a free woman!"

"I'm glad," Lily said. She reached the pier where the Staten Island ferry landed, and climbed out of the harbour.

She saw herself wandering along Wall Street. She was surrounded by incredibly tall, impersonal buildings. She was the only person alive – or so she thought until Hero and the Lucifers sped round the corner in their car.

She turned to run, but her feet were locked in concrete. She struggled to pull them free – but with no luck. The car bore down on her. Inside, Hero and the others were flashing their guns and laughing.

Convinced that the car was going to run her over, Lily shut her eyes. Her heart was racing to its final beat.

Then, amazingly, she found herself flying again. Looking down, she saw all four tyres on the car explode, and it ground to a halt.

"There!" she laughed, as Hero and the Lucifers were carted off to jail.

She headed towards Greenwich Village, soaring over buildings and streets and parks that previously she had known only from the ground. There she spied the village ball well underway.

It was just as she had painted it – maybe better. Everywhere were happy, tolerant people enjoying the music. There was good food and drink. Real conversation, and lovers holding hands.

*Nick*, she thought. *He's waiting by the gazebo.*

She forced herself to land. The place was like a carnival. It was a whirl of bright colours, party aromas, and high-pitched chatter. She picked a grilled cheese sandwich off a plate and greedily bit into it. It was perfect.

Pushing her way through the throng of dancers, she saw the gazebo ahead. But when she reached it, Nick was gone.

*Rosa*, she thought. *I must find Rosa.*

Lily began to spin to the beat of the salsa band. Soon she was a blur, like a cyclone. Rotating faster and faster, she lifted into the air, clearing the smog that enveloped New York City.

Soaring like an eagle, Lily realized she was flying North. Up the Hudson River valley, following the river like a silver ribbon past the soaring cliffs of

West Point, the government buildings in Albany, over the glistening lakes of the Adirondack Mountains.

Something told her she had reached Rochester. She tipped her wings to descend for a closer look. She searched and searched and searched. *Maybe Rosa's not here, she thought. Maybe her bus broke down. Or maybe she never left the city. Maybe she gave the money to Hero. Stupid girl!*

But then she saw her. At first Lily didn't recognize her sister. Rosa was dressed in new clothes – blue jeans and a simple white T-shirt. Her hair was clean and cut short. She wore silver earrings that were tiny, dangling wings. Lily had never seen her so happy and content.

Lily banked her wings, allowing her to make a slow, round turn back to the direction of the cottage.

Every so often a pocket of turbulence would throw her off balance. But she never fell from the sky.

Upon landing near the cottage, her wings dropped off like petals on a flower. As if they had served their purpose and she no longer needed them.

She felt her body with her hands. Lily was wearing her short black skirt and white linen shirt. She felt healthy and very much alive.

She examined her hands. They were smooth – not sore and rough as they were when she had finished the mural.

For the first time in her life she felt grass beneath her bare feet.

She had to find Nick. She wanted to hold him and tell him she would never leave. That they would be together for all eternity in this world of light.

## EPILOGUE

*Jupiter promises a reward as it transits your solar second house of money and possessions. The depth of your emotions and your philosophical approach to life brings unexpected harmony and balance to your world.*

"We checked every inch of the building," the city worker told the police. "And no sign of the missing girl."

"You're sure?" the police officer asked.

"Absolutely," the worker said. "If she's planning to stop the demolition, it's not by hiding in the building."

As it was, the demolition had been delayed for hours, while the search for Lily was underway. Police had combed the area, asking residents if they'd seen her. Word of the demolition and of Lily's disappearance spread. Pretty

soon, a crowd was pressing against the wooden barriers. Everyone was craning for a better view of the suddenly famous mural.

Television crews and reporters began to arrive. In a matter of minutes, live reports were being broadcast from the scene round the country.

From city hall, the mayor issued a statement. Although he hoped for Lily's safety and valued the importance of public art, the demolition would go ahead.

Meanwhile, a detective went to the apartment, where Stormy swore she knew nothing of the whereabouts of either of her two daughters. While he was there, though, Stormy had plenty to tell the detective about Danny. For starters, she described how Danny dislocated Rosa's shoulder and later blacked her eye. When the detective asked if Stormy was willing to press charges, she said, "Yes. I just wish I'd had the courage earlier, when it could have helped Rosa and Lily."

Kit and Phil hailed a taxi and drove all over the Village, asking people to keep an eye out for Lily. Then, unsuccessful in finding her, they ordered the driver to head for the mural.

In another part of the city, a SWAT team armed with a search warrant broke down the door to Hero's apartment. Swarming through the place, they surprised him and the Lucifers before any of them could react. While Hero was being led away in handcuffs, a member of the SWAT team pulled up the bedroom floor.

"Here it is," he reported. "Just like that letter promised."

Back at the building, the scene had taken on a carnival atmosphere. Since it was another scorching day, pushcart vendors were selling cold drinks and ice cream. People were having their pictures taken standing in front of the mural. Music was playing out of a nearby open window, and strangers danced with one another in the vacant lot.

"I feel responsible," Veronica was telling a reporter friend. "If only I hadn't been so worried about my job. About MIVA. I couldn't even get them to give her a few cans of paint. How could I have prevented them from tearing down the painting? She shook her head. "I'll feel terrible if something bad has happened to Lily."

Another reporter was interviewing the neighbourhood man with the dog named Marley. "You're talking to the right guy," he assured the reporter. "I watched the mural progress every step of the way. It's a real shame they're tearing down the building. But I guess that's progress."

"When did the girl finish the mural?" the reporter asked.

"Must have been during the night," the man said, studying it. "That girl nearly killed herself trying to get it done. My guess is she's wandered off

somewhere. Hey, if I was her, I wouldn't hang round to watch it get destroyed either."

Kit and Phil arrived and found Veronica in the crowd. "Any luck?" Veronica asked.

"No," Kit said. She looked up at the mural. "Wow, that's great. Lily really is an artist."

"She's probably up at the Hanson-Baker Gallery making arrangements for her first show as we speak," Phil said cynically. "She'll show up. Just watch."

An unmarked police car arrived. The detective got out and escorted Stormy through the crowd. She was wearing far too much make-up. She looked up at the mural. "Lily," she whispered, wiping a tear from her eye. "It's beautiful. I'm so sorry. But I've taken care of that louse Danny. I'll be a better mom. Just you wait and see."

The enormous mobile crane lumbered into place. At the end of its extended metal arm, dangling from a thickly linked chain, was a heavy wrecking ball. The operator put his hands on the levers. He waited for the signal from the crew chief.

"You can't do this!" Veronica pleaded with the crew chief. "It's wrong!"

"Look, lady, we got a permit saying today's the day," the chief insisted. He glanced at his watch. Then he walked over to the police officer in charge. "Well?"

The officer took a final look over the crowd. "Let's do it," he said.

The crew chief turned to the crane operator and waved. The operator waved back.

The gigantic crane began to turn, taking its massive arm with it. The wrecking ball, powered by the momentum, began to swing away from the wall.

The crowd became still. Even the music stopped. There was no sound other than the straining roar of the mobile crane.

The operator reversed the lever. The crane rotated back towards the wall. The long steel arm rushed through the air, taking the wrecking ball with it. The arm moved faster and faster. The wrecking ball soon passed in front of the arm. It was cruising towards the mural at top speed.

On the corner the phone began to ring.

"Look!" Kit shouted suddenly. "The painting!"

All eyes focused on the mural.

"Oh, my god!" Veronica said, pointing at the gazebo in the corner of the scene. "It's Lily!"

Lily had suddenly appeared in the picture, holding hands with Nick, her chin tilted up to smile at him.



"She looks so happy," Stormy whispered. "Happier than I've ever seen her."

An instant later, the entire mural was bathed in the most brilliant pool of pure white light. And then it, too, vanished – as if sucked through the brick by a supernatural force.

Then the ball hit, destroying the wall forever.