
Under a Parrot Sky
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Chapter 1

Just a minute ago she had seen an army of jellyfish with bright colours and deadly stingers, and now she was face to face with a giant hippo! Lily stared at the picture and imagined herself right there, on the banks of the brown river, watching it for real through her camera lens.

"Is that hippo yawning?" Lily's mother asked, peering closely at the photograph.

"Opening their jaws is a sign of aggression," Lily said. "It says so on the information."

On the information sheet next to the picture, it also said that the photographer was a ten-year-old girl called Asreen. *Lucky Asreen,* thought Lily, *ending up in the finals of the Young Photographer of the Year!* With every photo she'd seen in the exhibition, Lily's desire to be part of it had grown. She had been taking photos and reading books about photography since she was six. Having a photo on display for everyone to admire would be a dream come true.

"Even if it is angry, I think this hippo is my favourite," her mother said.

"Come over here, I'll show you mine!"

Lily ran to a photograph further along the wall. It was a huge parrot in flight, its green and yellow feathers electric against the dark forest background. The photograph was titled, 'Cloak of Colour'.

"It's a great green macaw. The girl who shot it is only 11 years old."



"She shot it?" Lily's mother said, alarmed.

"With a camera, silly!" Lily sighed. "A camera just like mine. I've decided – I'm going to enter the competition next year."

Her mother smiled. "I can see it now … This year's Young Photographer of the Year is … Lily Costas!"

Lily performed a little bow, and her mother clapped.

"Come on, we'd better meet Dad. He's waiting for us in the cafe."

"Why did he leave?" Lily asked.

"I think he got a bit bored after the first hour."

"Bored?" Lily gasped with disbelief. "I could stay here all day and I wouldn't get bored."

Lily's mother laughed. "Come on, let's pick up an entry form for next year's competition on the way out. And we'll buy a postcard or two from the gift shop as souvenirs. We'll get the parrot one, shall we?"

"And the yawning hippo for Dad," Lily said with a naughty grin.

On the way home, Lily daydreamed about a large photograph mounted on a wall in a grand building. It would be bold and bright, and people would crowd around, leaning in to read the information sheet next to it.

Title: _____

Photographer: Liliana Costas, age 11
United Kingdom

Hmm, what would the title be? considered Lily. *It would have to be exotic-sounding, like 'A Sky of Parrots' or 'A Paintbox of Flowers' ... Something vibrant and filled with rainbow colours …*

At the sound of rain against the car window, Lily woke from her daydream and looked at the competition form in her hands. The deadline for entries was March, just three months away. Her heart



sank. Wind, rain and mud is all that happened before March in the United Kingdom. December, January, February – every single month was dull and grey.

She was about to crumple the paper into a ball when she remembered something. The February school holiday! Her parents had talked about a trip to see Aunty Agda – yes, she'd heard them discussing flight times and whether they could take her out of school for a couple of days. *Aunty Agda didn't live around the corner. She lived somewhere exciting. Where was it again?* wondered Lily. *Oh yes …*

South Africa!

Chapter 2

The engines began to roar as the plane picked up speed. A few more seconds and they'd be taking off. Lily gripped the book in her lap.

A Guide to Birds of South Africa was her favourite possession. It went with her everywhere. She knew every bird in it, from eagles to bee-eaters to sunbirds – and if she could get a photo of a magical lilac-breasted roller, the judges of the Young Photographer of the Year wouldn't be able to resist!



The only trouble was, the plane wasn't going to South Africa.

Instead of flying south towards warmth and colour, Lily was heading north, to a land that was cold and white.

Just four weeks before the trip to South Africa, Lily's parents had received an invitation to talk at a World Geology Conference in Norway. They were both geologists – experts in rock pressure and oil fields – and Lily knew it was really important. But when she'd looked up Norway on the Internet, it looked like a white desert, and it was hard to hide her disappointment. To make things worse, her best friend Olive was going to Australia for two weeks. Australia! She could take a thousand winning photographs in a place like that.

But now she wouldn't even be entering the competition.

What would be the point? she thought. *What was there to see in Norway but snow, snow, snow?*

There wasn't a direct flight, so they had to change planes in Norway's capital, Oslo. By the time they landed in Tromsø, it was late at night and Lily was tired.

They were met at the airport by a tall man with a wide smile, who took her hand and shook it roughly.

"I'm Ivan. Welcome to the Land of the Midnight Sun!" he said.

"But I don't see any sun," Lily said.

"Not now, but come back in summertime, and then you will see nothing but sun. It never sets. You're impressed?" Ivan was watching her for a reaction.

Lily smiled and nodded, even though the only thing that could possibly impress her at that moment would be news that they were getting straight on to a plane to South Africa.

"She is speechless," he declared, clapping his hands. "She can't believe it! I have lots more stories to tell you, but maybe not tonight, hey? Come on, let's get you all tucked up in bed."



"Ivan Larsen works at the Institute for Geoscience," Lily's father explained.

"He's one of the conference organisers, and his family has invited us to stay," Lily's mother said.

"And I have kids, so while your parents are working, you won't be lonely," Ivan added.

As they drove into the night, Lily could see nothing but the eerie blue of snow at night – on the ground, on the rooftops and on the dark, craggy mountains all around. Everything was deadly silent, as if the land had been smothered by a blanket. It felt like the loneliest place on Earth.

Chapter 3

Lily's eyes flickered open.

She was on a sofa-bed in Ivan's study. The night before, she had fallen asleep instantly without knowing or caring where she was. Now, she could see shelves of books about Norway, and tall display cases with glass doors. They were filled with bits of rock and crystal that glistened in the bright sunshine pouring through the window.

Lily got up and opened the study door. There were voices down the corridor. A strange language. A dog barking. Plates rattling on a table. The smells of toast and coffee. Her tummy rumbled. Still in her pyjamas, she headed towards the noise and found herself in the kitchen.

There wasn't a single face she recognised. A boy and a girl sat at the table, and a woman was tidying plates. She stopped when she saw Lily.

"Hello, sleepy head!" she said. "*Kom og sett deg*. Come and sit." Her voice was funny and delicate.



"I am Linn, and this is Morten and this is Asta." She smiled. "Morten is 16 but Asta I think is your age, 12, yes?"

"I'm 11, nearly 12," Lily said, trying not to panic. Where were her parents? "Nice to meet you. Is my mum here?"

"They have all gone to work already. You are sleeping very late! We are finished breakfast, but there is coffee and toast and jam for you. Asta, please help our guest."

Linn's voice rose and fell like a lullaby; it was sweet and friendly. The children were not. Morten smiled only briefly before looking back at his phone, and from the look on Asta's sour face, helping the guest was the last thing she wanted to do.

"Coffee?" Asta said unsmiling.

"No thank you. I don't drink coffee."

Under the table, something tickled Lily's legs and she shrieked.

"*Stikk, Bodil!*" Linn shouted. "*Stikk!*"

Linn shooed Bodil, a large brown and white husky, out of the room. Lily saw Morten coax him back in with food under the table.

"When will my parents be back?"

Linn shrugged. "When they finish looking at rocks. They think they are rock stars!"

"She always says that joke," Morten said, shaking his head.

Lily tried to hold back her tears. She didn't know these people, and although they spoke good English, it was all strange. She felt lost.

"What am I going to do today?" she asked.

"Well, you are going to be a Norwegian child."

"H-how?"

Linn smiled. "First, you learn how to ski. Morten and Asta will show you how."

Asta let out a huge sigh and skulked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

"Asta! *Kom hit!*" Linn called. "Come here!" she said again. The girl didn't return. "I am sorry. She is not happy at the moment. We give her some time, okay?"

That's two of us who aren't happy, Lily thought.

Lily was told to take ski clothes from the cupboard. Remembering the cold snow, she wrapped herself in so many layers she could barely move. Right outside the back door, there was a rack – a bit like a bicycle rack – that held long skis. Morten was further down the garden, already wearing his. Asta appeared and slipped hers on quickly and expertly, and glided towards Morten. She stopped and looked back.

"Morten! Morten! *Kom hit!*" she called, pointing at Lily.

When Morten saw Lily's outfit, he laughed so hard she wished the snow would swallow her up.

"Here in Tromsø, the weather is never so bad," Morten explained, still spluttering. "You will boil like a coffee pot. You should take off some layers."



Lily went inside and returned wearing just one warm jacket, ski trousers and gloves. Morten was right – it wasn't that cold, or maybe she was just still hot with embarrassment. Linn arrived, looking elegant in a red all-in-one ski suit. She was holding boots.

"These should be the right size for you."

Lily stood still as Linn tightened them. She looked up and around at the mountains.

"How do we get up there?" She pointed at the peaks.

"You are kidding me!" Morten said. "You are not going up there. You are learning to ski in the garden like a baby."

"He means beginner," Linn tutted. "There is always a hold up between languages."

"It's called a language barrier," Lily said.

Her parents had told her about it – how the choice of words in one language can create a misunderstanding in another. Even so, she felt her eyes sting with unfairness. Language barrier or not, the Larsen children were cruel. Linn seemed to be the only friendly person around.

"These skis are funny," Lily said.

"They are cross-country skis. Much longer and thinner than downhill skis. The boots are different, too. Can you see how the heel lifts up? It's so you can ski like you are walking. Morten, show Lily."



Morten skied down the garden and back again. He made it look so easy.

"Your turn," he said.

Lily gripped on to Linn's arm.

"When you want to stop, turn the tops of the skis inwards to make an upside-down V shape," Linn said, demonstrating. "Be brave now."

Linn peeled Lily's fingers away from her arm; immediately, Lily's feet slipped forwards. She made windmill movements with her arms as she tried to keep her balance. Morten laughed at her again, but she tried to ignore him. She bent her knees, thinking it would keep her steady, but it made her go faster. As she picked up speed she started to scream.

"Do a V shape," Linn called, so Lily angled her feet as she was shown.

But instead of coming to a gentle stop, the tips of the skis crossed over and crashed together. She tripped and fell.

"You have no control," Morten said, shaking his head.

"Let's go for a trek," Linn said. "You will get used to it."

Asta sighed heavily. "I stay home."

Linn paused and then nodded. "Do you mind?" she asked Lily.

Lily didn't mind at all. She and Asta were obviously never going to be friends.

Chapter 4

With Linn by her side, Lily made it down the long garden. Morten showed off his side-to-side skiing, called 'herringbone'; Linn said 'duckwalk' was a better description. It was too difficult for a beginner, but Lily was getting used to her skis. She could keep them both pointing forwards, at least!

At the bottom of the garden they went through a gate and on to a path into thick woods. The snowy forest floor was criss-crossed with ski tracks.

"Follow the tracks. It's easier that way," Linn said, slotting her own skis into the grooves.

Lily copied, and soon she began to get into a good rhythm.

"I think you are a Norwegian girl now!" Linn sang.

"*Yeg er Norsk*," Morten said. "It means 'I am Norwegian'. Say it: *Yeg er Norsk*."

"*Yeg er Norsk*," Lily called back.

"Remember, when you spell '*Yeg*' it starts with the letter 'j'. Jeg," Linn said.

"Mamma, she's not at school!" Morten said. "Come on, Norsk girl, let's race. I'll give you a head start. Go!"

Lily laughed nervously and pushed ahead, leaving Linn and Morten behind.

And that's when it happened.

At first, it was just a sound – a whooshing and clinking. She thought it was Morten catching up with her, but then a large group of men burst through the trees up ahead. They were wearing racing suits with numbers on their fronts. Their breath burst from their mouths in short cloudy puffs.

"Lily, stop!" Linn's voice warned from far behind.

But Lily couldn't stop. She was going fast now, skis tucked inside the tracks. She tried to change direction, but the skis were long and heavy – they wouldn't go where she wanted them to go … and … CRASH.

Some of the skiers jumped sideways, but most of them fell over her or crashed into each other. There were skis and men scattered everywhere.



"Sorry, sorry," was all Lily could say. But sorry wasn't good enough. The men were angry. They shook their heads and they shouted.

She hated this place. Hated it!

On her bed in the Larsens' study, Lily held *A Guide to Birds of South Africa* against her chest and sobbed. It wasn't fair. South Africa was going to be the holiday of her dreams, and now she was on a nightmare trip where everything was going wrong. The study door opened.

Lily leaped up and wrapped her arms around her mother's waist.

"I want to go home. Please, please, can we go?"

Lily's mother sat her back down on the edge of the bed. "So you tripped up the Tromsø Men's Cross-Country Ski Championship … No big deal."

Her mother was trying to make her laugh, but it only made Lily more upset.

"It's not your fault," her mother soothed. "They often have races through the forest, and Linn says she was silly to take you there without checking first. Besides," she added, lifting Lily's chin. "Those skiers now have a very funny story to tell their families!"

"They weren't laughing," Lily sniffed. "They were really angry."

"Maybe they won't laugh today, but one day they will. And so will you, when you get your sense of humour back." She winked.

Linn appeared in the doorway. “Come on, my champion tripper,” she said. “We have the fire on in the living room, and you must try *gløgg* – it is hot apple juice with spices. You will like it.”



Lily shook her head and buried it in her pillow.

“I think it’s been a big day,” Lily’s mother explained.

“Asta isn’t feeling well, either,” Linn said.

“Everything will be better in the morning,” said Lily’s mother. “You’ll see.”

Lily doubted that very much.

Chapter 5

When Lily woke, every single muscle in her body ached – her legs and arms, and even her hips. She hobbled into the kitchen where everyone apart from Asta was already seated for breakfast.

“Aha!” Ivan said with a big smile. “Cross-country skiing is a workout, yes?”

Lily nodded. “Pretty painful.”

“Well, the good news is – you are strong enough to live in Norway,” he said. “You have to be tough to live here, and you were tough enough to stop a whole race!” He laughed loudly and Lily felt her face go hot.

“Ivan …” Linn tutted. “Don’t tease.”

“No, no. It’s just for fun,” Ivan said. “Come, Lily, you must be hungry, and you’re in time for a full breakfast today. There is yoghurt, toast, cheese, fish, coffee …”

He gestured to the table with its strange selection of foods. Lily asked for plain toast.