

Chapter 6: The Mall

"That lump on your head is getting better," Asha told Lily

They were at the South Common Mall; not the biggest or best mall in the city, but it had a nice food court and some of her favourite stores. People milled about, moving in and out of stores in a slow but constant stream. An RC bot zipped between tables, collecting trash.

"Yeah, I keep putting ice on it," Lily replied.

She was eating sushi — or *shushimi* as Lily had corrected her — which Asha swore *she'd* never eat based on the fact that it was raw fish. "Mom's been saying she'll have the lab guys give me a CAT scan if it doesn't go away soon."

Asha took a drink of her pop then asked, "And they do this at your mom's lab?"

"Well, HAAS — that's where my Mom works — does a lot of research. I don't think they'd really put me in one of those, though. Did you have a CAT scan when they were trying to figure out your...you know, condition?"

"They might have. I can't remember."

Asha didn't like to talk about that time in the hospital. Every time she did she got a serious pain in her stomach and her mind went all fuzzy.

"Why did you hit Trevor?" Lily asked.

"He just made me *so* angry. I'm kind of sorry I did that though."

She wished she could tell Lily what was happening to her. Lily was the smartest person she knew and probably the only person who could help her find answers.

"Why would you be sorry? They deserved it."

"I guess..."

"Is it really bad?"

"What?" Asha asked, confused.

"The lump."

"Oh, the lump. No you're fine."

"Good. On a side note I've figured out who's spraying those Dragon symbols at the school."

"Really? Who?"

"It's Mick Gallows."

"What? That's crazy."

"Just hear me out. The Dragon said they were in our schools. I think they might have students working for them. I read that certain types of kids are drawn to violent gangs like this. They're usually poor, not very intelligent, don't have many friends, and are often bullied. He fits the profile."

Asha didn't want to point out that they both fit the profile as well.

"Plus, did you see how he was laughing at the end of gym class? He seems unstable."

Could Lily be right? It would make sense that he could be the one doing it. If it was him, what could she do about it?

"We should keep an eye on him."

"Are you —"

Asha was knocked from behind and stumbled into Lily, her tray dropped to the floor with a crash. She turned around, ready to confront whoever had run her over, only to find Mick Gallows.

"Sorry ladies!" he apologized. "I was trying to get away from — oh wow! What happened to you?" he asked, pointing at the red lump on Lily's forehead.

"Get lost, Mick," Lily said, glaring.

"Did you know you have a giant zit on your forehead? `Cause you do,"

"It's not a zit!" Lily exclaimed, turning away from him. "I hit my head in gym class."

"What? When?"

"When Trevor knocked me down. Remember?"

"That was two days ago."

"So?"

"Shouldn't it have shown up before now?"

"It did, I've just been hiding it."

"Behind what, the space station? It's huge!"

"It's not huge! Asha, tell him it's not huge!" Lily cried, rounding on Asha.

To tell the truth, Asha thought it *was* huge but wasn't about to tell Lily.

"Nice check, by the way, Asha," Mick said. "Did you see the look on Keri's face when Trevor crashed into her? I wish I had a camera!"

"It's not funny," Lily said.

"Why? You didn't get in trouble did you, Asha? That check was *so* epic."

Asha was embarrassed to even think about what she'd done; she ducked down to pick up Lily's tray.

"Did you guys hear? They caught the guy who bombed the downtown, just a while ago. Some guy with jet boots," Mick said, excited.

Asha's hand paused, gripping the tray. The man was in jail? Did he say anything about her? About what she had — a white hot pain shot through her arm. It twitched, the tray went flying and Asha dropped to her hands and knees, gasping in agony. Then the food court lit up.

Not again, Asha thought. *Not* —

An explosion knocked her over with a thunderous boom. She was slammed to the floor from the force of it, the air nearly knocked out of her lungs; all around her the building shook. Pieces of the walls and ceiling rained down, showering her with debris.

A high-pitched ring sounded in her ear. Flames grew around her, licking at her arms and legs. The high pitched ring rose higher and higher. A moment later Asha understood what it was: people were screaming. She jumped to her feet, coughing out dust.

The place was in chaos; tables were overturned, pillars were knocked down, chunks of the floor were demolished, and everywhere she looked there was fire.

"Take everything!" a loud, rumbling voice commanded.

Asha spun around to see four men not more than fifty feet away, a giant hole blown out of the wall behind them. Dark black dragon tattoos covered their faces. Two of the men waved guns in front of them daring anyone to move, one carried a humongous gun; the last had what looked like metal arms. She recognized him immediately; he didn't have metal arms at the time but it was definitely him: the man who had killed Captain Stoneman. And killed her mother.

Asha heard a low moan and turned to find Lily and Mick on the floor covered in chunks of plaster and dust. Lily was curled up and crying, arms above her head; Mick was moaning, holding his forehead in his hands, blood pouring between his fingers.

Once again something switched in Asha; her breathing slowed, her eyes narrowed, and her heartbeat hammered in her head. She could feel the muscles tighten in her arms and legs, every part of her seemed to be on fire. An image of her mother lunging into blazing house flashed through her mind. Asha turned her glare on the man with the metal arms.

He picked up the RC bot and Asha ran; not away from the men but toward them. She pumped her legs; once, twice, three times. The man cocked his arm back. The air whipped passed her ears. He drew his arm back farther and then Asha was in front of him.

She threw up her hands, slamming them into his chest with all her strength. She felt his chest cave in around her hands then he flew back, crashing into the men behind him. They tumbled through the hole in the wall and into the parking lot beyond. They slammed into the pavement, kicking up snow when they hit the solid ground.

Asha didn't wait to see if they'd get back up; she turned and sprinted back to Lily and Mick, who were both still sitting dazed on the floor.

"Come on!" Asha ordered, grabbing each by the arm and dragging them to their feet.

"Agh!" Lily gasped, trying to stand. Her leg buckled and she fell. Asha reached down again, slipped her arm around Lily's waist, and hauled her up.

"Wha?" Mick mumbled.

His head lolled back and he began to topple over. Asha hooked her other arm under his armpits and started moving.

She led them down a hallway to the nearest exit, half dragging, half carrying them. She kicked open the exit door when she reached it, destroying the latch. People were streaming out of the building, screaming as they fled the fire and destruction. Moving quickly, she pulled the two others down the street.

She cut into an alley about a block from the mall and gently let Lily and Mick slide to the ground. Lily rubbed her ankle, hissing with each stroke. Mick sat slumped over; the gash in his head trickled blood down his face, his eyes unfocused.

Asha looked around the alley. It was dimmer now, the clouds obscuring the sun. The brightness she had seen just moments ago had faded to the dull grey of the overcast afternoon.

"You guys okay?" Asha asked, crouching in front of them.

Lily shook her head then looked up. Her eyes were red and her face was dirty with grime. "My ankle really hurts," she said, her breath hitching.

"Mick?" Asha asked.

He just sat, dazed. Asha snapped her fingers in front of his eyes.

He blinked then lifted his head to look at her and asked, "What?"

"Are you okay?"

He nodded slowly and reached for his forehead, wincing when he touched the cut. Asha looked around for something to cover the wound with; nothing in the alley looked usable. She noticed a snag in the sleeve of her sweater just below her elbow; something had torn the fabric as she ran, although she couldn't remember what. She hooked her finger into the hole and ripped off the lower sleeve, bunching it up and pressing it against his forehead.

They sat like that for a few minutes, saying nothing. Asha could hear alarms ringing through the air.

"We have to go," Asha said, standing up. "It's not safe."

"How did you do that?" Mick asked.

"What do you mean?" Asha asked, distracted. She kept looking down the alley expecting to see the attackers at any moment.

"Back there. Those guys."

"I...didn't..."

"I saw you!" he hissed, looking at her with searching eyes.

"I saw, too," Lily said quietly from beside her. She was looking at Asha cautiously.

"I don't know."

An explosion boomed from the direction of the mall making all three of them jump.

"Forget it, we have to go. Now!"

"Help me up," Lily said, holding her hands up.

Asha took them and pulled. Lily seemed heavier. When they were running, Asha thought she could have carried the other girl halfway across the city. Now, she could barely stop herself from falling over. Lily hopped on one foot trying to regain her balance. Steadying Lily with one hand she offered the other to Mick.

"Nah, I'm good," he said, waving her hand away.

He stood up slowly keeping Asha's sleeve pressed against his forehead. He staggered a bit when he tried to take a step forward and had to grab onto Asha for balance. She wrapped his arm over her shoulders then wrapped Lily's arm over the opposite way and began to guide them down the alley.

"Wait," Lily said. "I gotta call my mom." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a cracked and mashed cell phone. Lily let out a low moan. "She's gonna kill me. I guess I should go home."

"Sure," Asha replied. Then something occurred to her. "Uhh...where do you live?"

"99 South Crescent," Lily replied through gritted teeth.

Asha halted. "South Crescent? That's where I live."

"No way," Lily said, a slight smile on her face.

"Wait," Mick said, turning to look at the two girls. "You've been, like, hanging out for how long,

and you don't know where either of you live?"

"Well, where do *you* live then?" Lily demanded.

Mick tilted his head back. "South Crescent," he sighed.

Asha and Lily looked at each other, then at Mick, then back to each other. Lily gave a small smirk and the pair burst out laughing. Then Mick started laughing. The three of them were trembling together, too tired to stand, too scared to fall down.

Their laughter turned to giggles then finally hitched breaths.

"Come on," Asha said, guiding them down the alley.