

## Chapter Twenty-three

HELP!

✕ ✕ Petra and Calder raced toward the garden and playground behind the U. School. They looked back every few seconds. A man in a dark jacket appeared from around the Fifty-ninth Street side of the building. He was running in their direction.

"Can you see who it is?" Petra's voice was jagged.  
"Are you the police?" yelled Calder.

There was no answer. Gasping for air, they paused for just a second, ready to hug a university policeman. At that moment the figure emerged from shadow and the moon caught the flat planes of his glasses, turning his eyes into pools of silver. He was moving directly toward them, and moving as if his life depended on it. He was not in uniform.

"Run!" Calder panted. Both kids took off, zigzagging around trees and bushes.

"HELP! HELP!" shrieked Petra. There was no one ahead of them. Where were the dog walkers, the students?

The man was gaining on them. They could now hear his breathing. Petra leaped over a sand

box and headed out of the playground. She heard a *thud* just behind her, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Calder falling over the edge of the climbing equipment.

She stopped.

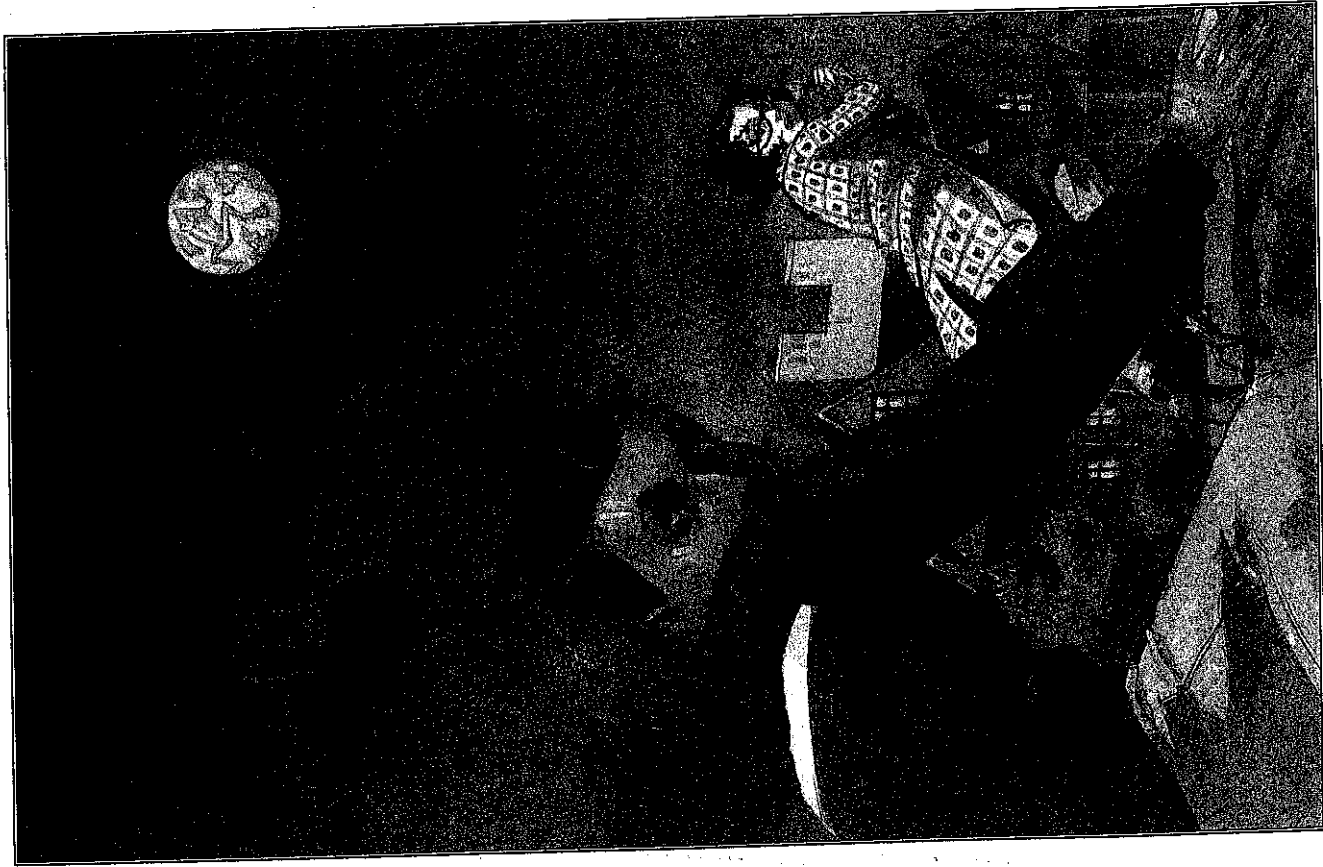
Calder shouted, "Go! GO!" He was up again, but the man was mere seconds behind him now.

Petra ran as she had never run before. She looked back to see Calder high on top of the slide, still clutching his bundle, the man standing below.

She could hear Calder's voice piercingly high with fright: "If you come any closer, I'll put my knee through it. I will. Then you'll be in big trouble." She couldn't understand the man's growly reply. Calder's voice drifted back: "You wouldn't dare hurt me!" She felt a sharp flash of fear for Calder, and at the same moment a flood of admiration for his quick thinking and bravery.

She was on Fifty-seventh Street now. She raced down the block to the Medici Restaurant, pulled open the heavy wooden door, and flung herself inside.

Luckily, a member of the university police was just leaving. Petra panted out her story about Calder and a man in the playground. She decided



not to say anything about the Lady. She didn't want to waste time on questions. They hurried to the alleyway, and she jumped into the front seat of the policeman's car. Minutes later, they pulled up next to the playground.

The blue lights swept across a form on the ground. She heard the policeman grunt, then say, "Stay where you are, kid," as he reached for his door handle. Leaving the painting on the front seat, Petra leaped out anyway.

As they got closer to the slide, she saw that the lump was Calder's sweatshirt on top of a flurry of newspapers, the papers he'd carried when they'd run from Delia Dell. "Oh yes! Calder got away!" Petra hopped up and down.

The policeman knelt to look at the sweatshirt. "Looks like there's blood on it," he said.

Horrified, Petra knelt, too. She saw drips of dark liquid on the gray hood.

"Come on, kid — you shouldn't be over here." The policeman stood up. Then he shouted, "You! Stop right now! This is the police!"

Petra looked up to see the man who had chased them duck out of the patrol car. Her bundle was tucked under his arm. He ran east

on Fifty-eighth Street, toward the yards and fences that Petra knew could hide him.

"That's him! That's the guy who was chasing us, and now he's stolen the painting!"

"He's got *what*?"

"Oh, please hurry!"

The policeman, one hand on his holster, ran to the patrol car. "Assault suspect heading east on Fifty-eighth Street — carrying stolen item. Immediate help requested."

"Say it's priceless, it's the Vermeer!"

Hesitating a moment, the policeman said gently, "Honey, they'll be right here."

"I'm telling you the TRUTH!"

Again, the policeman looked at her indulgently and shook his head. "What were you two doing out here alone at this hour, anyway?"

Petra whispered, "You wouldn't understand if I told you. Oh I hope Calder is all right!"

Petra, crying now, could hardly give her friend's address and telephone number. She had failed him and failed the Lady, and now Calder was hurt.

As they headed for the police station, she said in a still-shaky voice, "If you've ever believed in anything, please believe me now."

✕ ✕ ✕ Calder was reported as missing. His parents and Petra's parents set off immediately to search the neighborhood with the police. The Pillays and Andalees were shocked and excited by Petra's news, but there was no time for explanations. Calder's disappearance was more than a little frightening.

A neighbor stayed in the Pillays' house in case Calder got back on his own. Down the street, Petra was left home with the younger kids, who were all asleep. Still dressed, she paced back and forth in her front hall. Where would Calder have gone? And how did he get away from that man who ran so fast?

She sat down on the front stairs. What if the man hurt Calder in the playground and then dragged him off someplace? She tried not to picture it. Stay positive, she said to herself. Calder would never let that happen.

She asked herself where she would leave the painting if she were the thief and were trying to escape from Hyde Park unnoticed. At least she could think about that.

She imagined the Lady, wrapped in velvet