



by **Denene Millner**



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*For my daughters, Mari and Lila,  
who have long been waiting for their mommy  
to write a book they're allowed to read  
and  
For girls with big hearts, open minds, and the ability to  
embrace others just the way they are . . . Mina is for you.*

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# Chapter One

The one thing you need to know about me, like, right now? I so super-heart New York City — and especially the Brooklyn Bridge.

My stomach did double somersaults as my dad pulled the car onto Park Row and we passed City Hall. And then, standing at attention, was a big ol' pile of concrete and steel, arms open wide, waiting to hug our car and carry us over the East River. There were a gazillion buildings around us, and each building had a bazillion more windows, all of them peering out over what has to be the prettiest bridge in the world.

“I bet you it’s not as pretty as the Golden Gate Bridge,” my little sister, Maia, taunted, settling back into the pink pillow she brought along for

the long ride from Greenwood, New Jersey.  
“Or the London Bridge.”

“Whatever, Maia,” I said, turning to look out the back window of the car.

I’ve never seen the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, and I’ve only seen pictures of the London Bridge in one of Maia’s picture books from when she was little. But how could those views even begin to hold a candle to what you see when you cross the Brooklyn Bridge? Unfolding right in front of my eyes was the Manhattan skyline — an amazing collection of buildings stretching up, up, up into the air, tossing glittery silver kisses into the sky. What’s not to love?

“I like the George Washington Bridge better, anyway,” Maia said, folding her arms. “You can see New Jersey from there.”

“But you can’t see the Statue of Liberty from the George Washington Bridge,” I said, pressing my forehead to my window. “Dad, can’t you get into the right lane?” I begged. “We get a better view from there.”

My father waited for two cars to speed past us before he steered to the right, and I caught sight of her. There she was — the Statue of Liberty, lording over the water, her hand in the air, striking a fierce pose. I whipped out my drawing pad

and turned to a fresh page. This time, I decided to sketch her crown. I hadn't done that in a while, and my skills had improved from January, the last time I speed-sketched Lady Liberty while we were crossing the bridge. So I think this piece could rock. Maybe Auntie Jill would think it was good enough to show off at the SoHo Children's Art Program, the fancy art camp where she works and that I would be attending for six glorious weeks.

I couldn't wait. No sister. No 'rents. Just me, my art supplies, my favorite aunt in her super-fabulous brownstone in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and an art program I've been sweating since my auntie Jill started working there three years ago.

The only downside? I was already missing my best friends, Samantha and Liza, who I hadn't seen for ten days, not since we had our "See Ya Soon" going-away party. It wasn't easy going cold turkey without the two girls I've spent practically every second of every day with since we met on the soccer field in the first grade. We go to the same school and our parents visit one another on the weekends and holidays, and the three of us usually spend the entire summer hanging out together. But this year, Liza's parents were taking a massive road trip to somewhere random, and Sam's parents were vacationing on a beach somewhere with

another family. So let's just say our "See Ya Soon" celebration felt more like a "My Besties Are Going to Be Gone Forever" memorial service.

"How many times are you going to draw that thing?" Maia huffed. "It looks the same way she did the last hundred times you made drawings of it."

Of course, my sister didn't know what she was talking about. I mean, every time I look at Lady Liberty, I see something new — something more beautiful than the last. Always changing.

"What do you care?" I shot back. "Is there a law somewhere saying I can't draw the Statue of Liberty?"

"Okay, you two — just stop it already," my mom said from the passenger seat. "You guys have practically five more minutes with each other before we drop Mina off at Auntie Jill's for the summer. Surely, you can go without arguing for that long. We all should be enjoying these last moments with Mina before we leave."

"Exactly," I said, taking my eyes off the statue just long enough to wrinkle my nose at my little sister. She mimicked my face, but kept her mouth shut. Thank goodness.

I knew Maia was giving me a hard time because she was jealous. While I was going to summer with

Auntie Jill, she was going to be stuck at home, helping out at the Akwaaba by the Sea Bed & Breakfast, my mom's part-time summer job. Not that I'd be complaining about *that*. In summers past, we got to go with Mom maybe once or twice a week, and the beach is just a two-minute walk from the B&B. And once breakfast was served and the rooms were straightened up, my mom was usually happy to hang out on the beach with us while we dipped in and out of the water and played beach games with her boss's kids.

My favorite place *ever* is the beach; nothing makes me happier than riding a choice wave on my boogie board and feeling the hot sand beneath my feet. Well, nothing except my art. My mom says I was born with a pencil in one hand and a paintbrush in the other; I love to paint, draw, collage, and build things, and think nothing of spending an entire Saturday morning making my own paper from recycled scraps, or building a fancy dollhouse out of discarded cardboard and gadgets I find around the house.

One of these days, maybe I'll be just like my favorite artist, Romare Bearden. I've loved his art ever since Mom bought me a book of it for Christmas. Maybe my art will travel the world from museum to museum, and people will buy it

and put it up on their walls and call me an artistic genius. *She's the new Bearden*, they'll say. *Except she's a girl and not from Harlem.*

Yeah.

"Well, here we are," my mother sighed as my dad pulled into a space just down the street from my aunt's brownstone. "The beginning of a summer without my baby. In Brooklyn," she added, looking up and down the street disapprovingly.

"Come on, Mom, Brooklyn is awesome," I said as I watched my dad grab my suitcase. When he slammed the trunk closed, I practically sprinted down the block toward my aunt's brownstone. "My summer is going to be insane!"

"Uh-huh, that's my worry," my mom said as she headed up the staircase just behind my dad. He barely pushed the buzzer before my auntie Jill snatched open her carved mahogany door.

"Hey! You're here!" she said, pulling me into her embrace. "I'm so happy to see you!"

"Me too, Auntie Jill," I said, hugging her back. She smelled like warm vanilla and cinnamon; her lip gloss felt sticky on my cheek.

"Hey, hey — save some for me," my dad joked as he set my suitcase in the foyer. He gave his sister a kiss on the cheek. "Well, Jill, here she is, in the flesh — your little mini-me."

“You sure you’re ready to play mommy for six weeks?” my mom asked Auntie Jill as she kissed her hello, too. “She thinks she’s grown, but she’s still new to the double digits. Twelve-year-olds can be a handful, you know.”

“Mom!” I said, sucking my teeth.

“Well, hello to you, too, Miss April,” Auntie Jill said to my mom, laughing. “Just for the record: I may be younger than you, but I think I can handle a twelve-year-old.”

“See? There you go pointing out my age!” my mom laughed easily as Auntie Jill closed the door behind us.

“Aw, come on in here,” Auntie Jill said. “Let me take a look at you. I feel like I haven’t seen you all in ages.”

“Since New Year’s . . .” my dad chimed in.

“That’s a shame, too,” Auntie Jill said, cutting him off. “Y’all live in New Jersey, not Russia. It’s only a few hours’ drive to get here, you know.”

“Well, you know how it is,” my mom said. “Life gets in the way and we get busy, and sometimes two hours feels like twenty with these two fussing in the backseat of the car.”

“Speaking of ‘these two,’ where’s my Maia?” Auntie Jill said, peeking behind my dad’s large frame. Maia was fiddling by the door, checking out

the family photos on the parlor table by the door. “You better come give me some sugar!”

“Hi, Auntie Jill,” Maia said, exchanging hugs and kisses with our favorite aunt.

“Aw, why the sad face, pumpkin?” Auntie Jill asked.

“Somebody thinks it would be way cooler to hang with her aunt Jill in Brooklyn than on the beach with her mother,” my dad chimed in.

Frankly, I couldn’t blame Maia. Auntie Jill is the fire. She’s twenty-eight and lives alone in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, a fantastic neighborhood. She teaches art at a middle school right around the corner from her place; just down the street is the park, where she goes to play tennis with her super-hip friends; and the subway at the corner can take her anywhere she wants to go in New York City — all the museums, Rockefeller Center, Times Square.

I’ve been to her place only a few times — mostly, she drives out to see us during holidays because all of the family get-togethers happen at our house in Greenwood. But I get really excited whenever my parents announce a trip to Auntie Jill’s house because I know she’s going to have something incredible planned. Her friends, like her, are all funky artists who seem to spend their

days painting and writing and singing and dancing and debating about politics and history and theory. Half the time, I don't know what the heck they're talking about, but I love to be a fly on the wall when they're laughing and arguing and performing — especially when Auntie Jill pulls out her easel and creates while her friends are singing or doing poetry or busting a move. I sit mesmerized, watching her toss back her locs while her pastels and her paintbrushes glide across the canvas.

Do you see what kind of summer I was about to have?

Now I just needed my parents to leave already, so that I could get the party started.

“Well, let me show you where to put your things, pumpkin. I set it up really nice for you,” Auntie Jill said, taking me by the hand. When we all got to the top of the stairs, Auntie dramatically opened the door to her studio.

“This is it,” she said, spreading her arms wide.

It was so beautiful, I had to catch my breath. The huge window was framed by sheer, floor-sweeping lavender curtains tied back with a sparkly silver string of oversize beads — the perfect complement to the soft sage green walls. A floor-length mirror graced the wall across from

a daybed, which was piled deep with purple satin pillows — my favorite color. The opposite wall had a huge black square in the middle of it, with a basketful of pastels sitting on a shelf just to the right. Auntie Jill picked up a hot-pink chalk and scribbled *Welcome* across the wall.

“Lord, are we writing on walls now?” my mother asked, shocked.

Auntie Jill cracked up. “It’s a chalkboard,” she said. “See? It erases. It’s a special kind of paint that you can use to turn the whole wall into one big canvas. I put it there so that Mina can draw and write little messages whenever she’s inspired, and change them whenever she’s tired of it. I’ll take pictures of the really good ones before you erase them so you’ll have a collection of your work to remember, okay?”

“But, Auntie, this is your studio — I can’t sleep here,” I said, taking a running leap onto the daybed. I didn’t really mean what I said; I could sleep in that room forever.

“Oh, don’t worry — this is still my studio,” she said, pointing at her easel. On it was a palette of different shades of blue, and a canvas with a dibble of a few of the colors on it. Next to her easel was another — this one with my full name, *Wilhelmina*, written in script in purple marker

across the bottom. “We’re just going to share the studio while you’re here — how about that?”

“Oh my gosh, is that easel mine?” I said, rushing over to the beige stand and gently running my fingers over it.

“Besides my great-grandmother, you’re the only Wilhelmina I know,” Auntie Jill laughed. “So that easel must be yours. Every real artist has one.”

“Omigod, thank you, Auntie Jill,” I squealed as I hugged her tight.

“Auntie Jill, when I get old enough to go to the art camp can I stay in your studio, too?” Maia asked.

“Eh — there’s only room for one in this bed,” I said quickly. I didn’t want my little sister getting any ideas — she doesn’t even like drawing or the color purple.

“Now, now — there’s plenty of room up here for my little sweet potato,” Auntie Jill countered. “Of course you can stay with me.”

“But not right now!” I said, standing up and walking toward the door.

“Okay, then,” my mom said. “I’m just going to go on ahead and assume that you still love me, even though you’re rushing me out like you don’t want your mommy around anymore.”

“Love you, Mom,” I said, extending my arms for an embrace. She kissed me on each cheek and then beckoned Maia over to the doorway.

“We’ll call you when we get back home,” my dad said to Auntie Jill while he hugged me tight. “And you, young lady: Behave, okay? Listen to your aunt Jill and help her out. Play this right and we just might let you come back next year.”

“Come on, Dad, you know I’m the well-behaved one!” I laughed.

“Whatever,” Maia said, clearly insulted by the joke.

“Uh-huh,” Dad said.

My mother took my chin into her hands and ran her fingers over my chin-length reddish brown locs. “I love you — be good.”

“I will — promise,” I said, this time, fighting back tears as I gazed into her eyes.

“Okay, y’all — let’s go,” Dad said, heading down the stairs.

“Let me walk you out,” Auntie Jill said, close on their heels.

My folks were barely down the bottom of the first landing of stairs before I was back on the day-bed, bouncing around and screaming in the pillows. I was so totally geeked about my new

room and my new art space and my new camp! The only thing that would make it better was if Liza and Sam were there to enjoy my cool, posh new life. I made a mental note to send each of them an e-mail once I got settled and Auntie Jill showed me how to log on to her Mac.

I got up to grab my knapsack off the hallway floor where I'd dropped it; I yanked open the zipper and gingerly pulled out the framed picture of me, Liza, and Sam, hugging one another and grinning. We took that picture the day after school let out for the year, just as we were preparing for our big vacations away from one another. Sam's mom, who took the picture and framed a copy for each of us, had said, *So that you can take your best friends on your journey with you.* I'd been at my auntie Jill's for only about fifteen minutes, and already I had about an hour's worth of stuff to tell them.

I kissed the face of the picture of me and my best friends, and set it gingerly on the side table next to the daybed, and then headed back to the window to take in the view. It was Saturday afternoon and the block was filled with excitement — across the street and about eight brownstones down, a bunch of little girls were

playing hopscotch and Double Dutch while their moms sat on the stoop talking; another few houses down on Auntie Jill's side, a few teenage guys were standing under a massive tree growing out of a small sidewalk garden, laughing and roughing one another up. A few people were headed to the corner bodega; others were headed to Fort Greene Park. Seeing all those people in little pockets up and down the street was a little intimidating; I didn't know how to Double Dutch, those boys were playing a little too rough for my taste, and though the park was just down the block, it looked like a whole new world, what with those tall buildings stretched out above the trees. As grown-up as I wanted my mom and dad to think I was, I was a little nervous about being out there in that big city by myself. I was going to need to lean on Auntie Jill for a little bit until I got more comfortable.

From my new bedroom window, I watched Auntie Jill hug my dad and mom good-bye, kiss Maia, and wave after the car as it pulled off down South Elliott Place, toward Lafayette Avenue. My head got a little hot and a couple of tears rushed to the corners of my eyes as I saw the car turn left and disappear down the road.

Moments later, Auntie Jill called up the stairs. “Mina? Baby, come downstairs, let me get a look at you.” I wiped the tears from my eyes and checked my face in the mirror, then rushed down the stairs.

“So, buttercup, you hungry? I was in Manhattan last night and stopped by Zabar’s to pick up some hummus and pita bread, a few olives, a couple of bagels, and little whitefish, and some fresh strawberries for brunch.”

Auntie Jill got the side-eye for that one. Love her to pieces, but, um, whitefish? Olives? *Hummus*? Maybe it was a mental block, I don’t know, but I totally forgot that my auntie was a vegetarian. I’m talking tofu turkey for Thanksgiving. Trust me when I tell you, that didn’t go over too well when my auntie brought her dish to our family holiday gathering last November. She got clowned like you wouldn’t believe when she sat it next to the honey baked ham and asked my mom if she cooked the collards with meat. “It’s Thanksgiving,” Daddy had laughed. “You’ll live if a little smoked pig finds its way to your stomach. You better act like we were raised in the same house, forks on pork!” The whole house rocked with laughter over that one; Auntie Jill took it in stride, but I can tell she gets a

little wound up when people question why she thinks smashed chickpeas and hard, chewy, flat bread is the height of fine dining.

“Don’t worry,” Auntie Jill said, pulling me close and cracking up at the funny look on my face. “I’ll eat the whitefish; you can have the bagels,” she said. “I even bought cream cheese.”

I gave her another look.

“No, it doesn’t have scallions in it,” she added, knowing instinctively that I was about to question which kind she’d purchased. The last time Auntie Jill served me a bagel with cream cheese, she spread the scallions on really thick. Let’s just say it wasn’t exactly a favorite.

“Tell you what: I’ll go get our spread together and we can sit out on the stoop and catch up. Why don’t you go back upstairs and finish putting away your things — I’ll call you when everything is ready.”

“Okay,” I said, bounding up the stairs.

See? That’s why I love me some Auntie Jill: She just gets me. Even though she wasn’t going to be packing any ham sandwiches in my lunch for camp, she knew what I liked. Purple definitely tops the list. As does art. Math, too. Oh, and celebrity watching.

Who doesn’t like to see famous people up

close? Not that I ever have. Well, I did see Al Roker, the weather guy from the *Today* show, once at the beach on the Jersey shore. He was staying at the Akwaaba B&B for vacation with his family. My mom wouldn't let me go say hi, though. Plus, Liza said he doesn't count as a celebrity because he's a weather guy — no different from Sam's dad, Mack Macintosh, who's the weatherman on the local cable station back in Greenwood. But Al Roker is on TV and anyone who's on TV is famous in my book — even Sam's dad. I didn't feel like arguing with Liza over it, though.

Anyway, my aunt was always telling me about the famous people who live and hang out and perform in Brooklyn. Maybe one of them would walk by while Auntie and I were sitting outside. I wondered if my celebrity crush, Corbin Bleu, ever visited Fort Greene. He lived in California, but Brooklyn would be a hip enough place for him to show his face, right? Maybe I'd see him here. Maybe I could get an autograph. Or a picture!

I reached into my book bag and pulled out the Kodak EasyShare digital camera my parents got me for Christmas and slipped the handle of the tiny camera bag over my wrist. Then I picked up a purple pastel, and wrote *Mina IS here!* in big bubble letters all the way across the chalkboard wall,

and finished it with striped stars and polka-dot flowers.

I stood back and, arms folded, admired my work and smiled.

Yeah, this summer was going to be the best ever!