

# *Lilly's Way*

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This book is dedicated to Memore,  
my great-grandmother, the real Lillian St. Denis.

Thanks to my family for their patience and  
to Linda Peckham for her editorial work on this book.

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# Chapter 1

## Lilly

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“Lillian!”

Lilly heard her mother’s raspy morning voice and curled herself into a tighter ball. Her sleeping closet, across her sister’s bedroom from the old brick fireplace, had grown cold in the chill of the early spring night.

“Darn!” she muttered. She’d wanted to wake up early enough to finish writing a chapter of her book. She was almost done. All she needed was—

“Lilly!” This time closer. And angrier.

“Coming, Mama!”

Lilly hopped down from her sleeping closet, which was built into the wall. The small shelves held reams of paper, pens, and ink. It was her only privacy in the entire house. In her entire life! And it was certainly better than sleeping in the same bed with her snoring older sister Lu! Besides, in the cubby she was closer to the window, where she could hear Mona Lake softly lapping against the sea wall at night as it flowed toward Lake Michigan.

Lilly’s toes touched a silky, rustling cloth. In the dim light streaming through the window, she guessed it to be Lu’s green silk dress in a heap on the floor. *It figured!*

Lilly poured the water from the pitcher on the washstand into a bowl and splashed it on her face. “Ohhh!” she squealed. The ice cold water always surprised her.

“Shut up!” came a muffled voice from under the bed covers. “I’m sleeping!”

“Sorry, Lu,” Lilly sang. She grabbed for the towel that usually hung on a nail near the pitcher. Gone. She stared angrily at the lump that was her sister in the rumpled bed and wiped her face on her nightgown sleeves.

Lilly peeled off her nightgown, shivering as she donned her white cotton undergarments, which were nothing like Lu’s fancy black silk pantaloons with pink and blue ribbons woven throughout. Lu was probably sleeping in those. As Lilly walked toward the fire to dress in its ebbing warmth, her feet rustled through the dress again. Thoughts of damaging the precious silk dress ran through her mind, but she knew it was likely that she herself would wear it someday—in a cut-down version and probably out of style by the time it got to her. But green was a good color for her. Lu might be a pain, but she was a marvelous seamstress.

Lilly ran a brush through her thick, waist-length hair. She’d washed it the night before, and it was unruly, with tendrils teasing about her face and neck.

“Lillian Marie!” came a commanding whisper from the hallway.

“Yes, Mama!” Lillian pulled on her gray woolen dress, grabbed a ribbon of unknown color from Lu’s huge assortment hanging on the wall, and ran down the stairs. She turned the corner into the kitchen.

“Whoa, Lillybell! Lookout!” Gaston plowed into his sister as he dumped an armful of firewood into the metal bin by the huge brick fireplace.

“Sorry.” Lilly grabbed an apron from a hook and started tying it in back, hair ribbon clutched tightly in her teeth.

“Oh, Lillian! Your hair!” In a flash, her mother, Beth, was behind her, deftly French braiding her hair, her voice fast and chilled, like a winter’s wind on the lake. “Purple isn’t really your color,” she said. “It’s more attractive on Lu. But Mr. Laketon wants more potatoes, Mr. Smythe wants hotcakes, I need to get more coffee—and the bacon!” She handed Lilly a coffeepot for one hand, a plate of food for the other, and hurried over to the stove. Lilly pushed through the swinging door into the dining room.

Five men, all wearing handlebar mustaches, which were all the rage in that year of 1891, sat with newspapers open in front of them as they ate. Lilly quietly served the food. Mr. Smythe looked up with a brief smile of thanks before returning to his newspaper.

Beth swept in, wearing a sweet smile, her gray eyes dancing beneath black curls. “Mr. Smythe, more coffee?”

Immediately Mr. Smythe’s newspaper dropped as his eyes reflected appreciation of Beth’s hourglass figure. “Why, thank you, Madame St. Denis.”

Beth filled each cup around the table, ignoring a variety of admiring glances.

Lilly cleared as many dirty dishes from the table as she could carry into the kitchen, dumping them noisily into the sink.

“Lillian. Please be careful.” Lilly knew that her mother’s sing-song voice was for the sake of the guests and that she was actually angry about the dishes. But she didn’t care.

“Yes, Mama,” she said obediently. Then she quietly shoved another dish into the sink. She hated waiting on people! She hated working in the family inn. She wanted to attend college and become a writer—perhaps even a newspaper editor.

Lu thought she was crazy. Lu, like most people, thought that too much education would ruin a girl’s chances of snaring a husband. Lu was boy-crazy—all she wanted was to marry well.

“Not me!” said Lilly defiantly. “I’ll own my own newspaper and tell *others* what to do!” Her voice was hushed, but it was full of pride and promise.

Gaston lumbered in from outdoors, a bucket of water in each gloved hand. As he filled a large kettle on the stove, he smiled at Lilly. “Let me guess: Lu’s sleeping in.”

Lilly turned to him, arms folded tightly against her chest. “How *did* you guess?”

With a shrug and a chuckle, Gaston left Lilly standing at the sink. Inside, the lantern light grew dimmer as dawn’s glow increased, but it was still dark enough that Lilly could see her reflection in the window over the huge double sink: unruly red hair, freckles in the summer, and the ugliest, biggest nose in the world! Even though she was only twelve years old, Lilly was sure that no one anywhere had an uglier nose than she did. Her deep blue eyes were her only redeeming feature, but they didn’t even begin to make up for everything else.

Everyone else in her family—her sister Lu, her brothers Gaston and Leo, and her mother—all had the cute little Montgomery nose and dark normal hair. Lilly, the youngest in the family, must have inherited her looks from her father’s side—the St. Denis hair, eyes, and nose. How had the rest of them managed to take after their mother, but she had not? It wasn’t fair.

She watched through the window as Gaston pumped two more bucketsful at the well. Gaston worked hard at the inn. She couldn’t recall ever seeing him sit still unless it was to work on drawings of his inventions. He wouldn’t have to work so hard if their papa was there.

She met her own gaze as she peered again at her reflection. “Damn, Papa!” she hissed. “Damn, Jacques St. Denis!”

“Lilly!” came her mother’s sing-song voice from the dining room.

With a sigh and a stomp of her foot, Lilly picked up a tray. “Yes, Mama!”

# Chapter 2

## A Change to Come

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“Stop it, Lu!” Lilly scratched out another line with her pen nib in frustration. The line had sounded so good the night before when she’d written it, but maybe the countess shouldn’t faint so early in the story.

*Scree-choo-scree-choo-scree-choo* came from the small sewing room off the bedroom again.

Lilly looked up from her paper. “Lu, stop that noise!”

Lu stomped into the bedroom, chestnut hair clumped on top of her head, pink hair bow askew, her pink flowered robe tight around her tiny waist. “If you don’t like the sound, tell Mother to buy me a new Singer sewing machine! The pedal on this one barely moves! My leg is about to fall off from pushing that thing!”

“Poor Lulu,” Lilly teased.

“Don’t call me that!” With a scowl and a stomp, Lu whirled around and disappeared again into the sewing room.

“Did you have fun at the horse sleigh race on Black Lake last night?” Lilly asked as she chewed several strands of hair. “Did you actually drive a sleigh, or were you just an innocent observer?”

A furious Lu skidded around the corner and immediately took on an air of calm as she pretended to make her bed.

“Lillian Marie! You do have such a wild imagination. Whatever made you think of such a thing?”

Lilly laid down on her stomach, arms dangling out of her cubby. Now she was comfortable. “Why, Lulu, it must have been when Teddy teased you about always betting on the loser between goodnight smooches last—”

“Lilly!” Lu cried, no longer pretending to make her bed. “You were watching us? You are such a little...such a....”

“Now don’t hurt yourself thinking of a good word, Lu.” Lilly leaned back into her cubby and smiled. *Maybe the countess should just pretend to faint.* Loud voices from downstairs distracted her.

“But, Mama.” Gaston tried hard to keep the squeak out of his voice. “I want to go back to school. Central School may have burned down, but as soon as they build another one, I want to go back. Mr. Hackley said he would have one built as soon as possible!”

“But I need you here.” Beth clasped her hands as she spoke. “How can I run this inn without you? We barely manage as it is. I can’t afford to hire more help.”

Taking his mother’s hands in his, Gaston sat her down at the kitchen table. He squeezed her hands gently, his warm, hazel eyes peering intensely into her gray ones. “Mama, I can make a lot of money working just through the spring. Then I can work at the inn all summer and go back to school in the fall. What’s the problem with that?”

Beth failed to keep her eyes from misting. “The problem is that you may get hurt.”

Gaston laughed, and Beth pulled her hands from his abruptly. Just then the maid, Elyse, sauntered through the kitchen with an armful of breakfast dishes from the dining room. Although Beth had asked her several times not to wear such tight-fitting blouses, she still did. Beth understood that Elyse wore hand-me-downs from her less-endowed older sister, but there had to be some alternative to flaunting herself all over the inn, and especially in front of Gaston.



Central School

“Elyse, would you please excuse us a moment?” Beth asked politely.

“*Oui, madame.*” Elyse curtsied lightly toward Beth, but her eyes never left Gaston.

When they were alone again, Beth brought Gaston’s chin back around so that he wasn’t watching Elyse’s remarkably slow exit from the kitchen. As she touched his jaw, she realized that at fifteen, he was becoming a man. He had been taller than she was for some time already. But now she sensed his approaching manhood more than ever in his drive to help the family and to become independent. And in his interest in Elyse! Maybe the mill *would* be safer than having him stay at the inn with Elyse on the prowl!

“Do you promise you won’t get hurt?” she asked.

He didn’t laugh this time as his eyes held hers, grave and sincere. “Yes, Mama, I promise.”

“Okay then,” she said. She gently pulled away and called upstairs. “Lilly. Lu. Come down, please. Family meeting.”

“Darn it!” Lilly’s knee turned bright red as it scraped against the edge of her closet. As a single red rivulet zigzagged slowly down to her ankle, she whisked her skirt away to avoid staining it.

“Lu!” Lilly yelled, hobbling over to the washstand. All she heard in reply was the whirring and clumping of the sewing machine.

“I tried,” Lilly mumbled, holding a wet rag to her knee as she limped toward the stairs.

As Lilly galumphed noisily down the stairs, Beth appeared at the bottom. “What on earth...?” Beth began, glancing at the rag on Lilly’s knee. But she simply shook her head and asked, “Where’s your sister?”

“I called her,” Lilly said, “but....”

Beth sighed. “Wait in the kitchen, please, and take care not to let that stain your skirt,” she said, pulling Lilly’s skirt farther away from her oozing knee. She gathered her skirts and trotted up the stairs.

As she rounded the corner at the top of the stairs, Beth decided not to try to yell over the screeching of the sewing machine. Her guests had heard enough of that already this morning. Noticing the unkempt bed and clothes strewn about the floor, Beth forced herself not to stop and tidy up. There was too much to do downstairs that the guests *could* see.

Peeking into the sewing room, Beth couldn’t help but feel a smile crease her lips. Lu was her spoiled one. She knew that. But what a wonderful seamstress she was. She often mended clothes for her guests, but her true gift was in designing and sewing women’s fashions. The ice-blue taffeta creation on the dress form next to Lu was a dream. Beth wondered how much the taffeta material had cost.

“Lu!” Beth’s voice was a strained whisper.

Lu stopped abruptly.

“Downstairs, please. We’re all waiting for you!”

“I didn’t know, Mama! I’m almost done with this sleeve. I’ll be down in a few—”

*“Now, Eulalie!”*

Lu’s foot left the pedal. “Very well. My leg is tired anyway.”

“Thank you,” Beth said over her shoulder as she bustled down the stairs.

When they were gathered in the kitchen, Beth spoke. “We need to discuss something very important to us as a family.”