

ONE

“Sierra? What are you staring at?”

“Nothing, Manny.”

Blatant lie. Sierra glanced down from the scaffolding to where Manny the Domino King stood with his arms crossed over his chest. “You sure?” he said.

“Yeah.” Sierra looked back at the mural. She hadn’t been making it up: a single tear glistened at the corner of Papa Acevedo’s painted eyes. The tear wasn’t moving — of course it wasn’t moving: It was paint! But still: It hadn’t been there yesterday or the day before.

And the portrait was fading; it seemed to disappear more and more every hour. This afternoon when she arrived at the Junklot to work on her own mural, it took Sierra a few seconds to find the old man’s face peering out from the brick. But fading murals and crying murals were totally different flavors of weird.

She turned back to her own painting, on a much newer concrete façade adjacent to the old brick building from which Papa Acevedo’s face stared out. “Hey, Manny,” Sierra

said. “You sure the people who own this building won’t be mad about my mural?”

“We’re sure they *will* be,” Manny chuckled. “That’s why we asked you to do it. We hate the Tower. We spit on the Tower. Your paint is our nasty loogie, hocked upon the stupidity that is the Tower.” He grinned up at Sierra and then turned back to an old typewriter he’d been tinkering with.

“Great,” Sierra said. The Tower had shown up just over a year ago, totally unannounced: a five-story concrete monstrosity on a block otherwise full of brownstones. The developers built the outer structure quickly and then left it, abandoned and unfinished, its unpaned windows staring emptily out into the Brooklyn skies. The Tower’s northern wall sat right on the edge of the Junklot, where mountains of trashed cars waited like crumpled-up scraps of paper. Manny and the other old guys who played dominos in the lot had immediately declared war on it.

Sierra dabbed dark green paint along the neck of the dragon she was working on. It reared all the way up to the fifth floor of the Tower, and even though most of its body was just an outline, Sierra could tell it was gonna be fierce. She shaded rows of scales and spines, and smiled at how the creature seemed to come to life a fraction more with each new detail.

When Manny first asked her to paint something on the Tower, she’d refused. She’d never painted a mural before, just filled notebook after notebook with wild creatures and

winged, battle-ready versions of her friends and neighbors. And a whole wall? If she messed up, all of Brooklyn would see it. But Manny was persistent, said she could paint anything she wanted, said he'd set up a scaffolding. He added that if her old Grandpa Lázaro was still talking in full sentences instead of laid up from that stroke he'd had, he would've wanted her to do it too.

That last one sealed it. Sierra couldn't say no to even the idea of Grandpa Lázaro. And so here she was, on the second day of summer break, adding a few more scales along a pair of dragon wings and worrying about crying murals.

Her phone buzzed with a text from her best friend, Bennie:

*party at sully's tonight. First of the summmmmmer!!!!
Imma meet you at your house be ready in an hour.*

The first party of the summer was always amazing. Sierra smiled, pocketed her phone, and started packing up her supplies. It was nine p.m. The dragon could wait.

She looked back at the mural of Papa Acevedo, barely visible now against the crumbling brick wall. It wasn't just that there was a new tear on his face; his whole expression had changed. The man — the painting, rather — looked downright afraid. Papa Acevedo had been one of Grandpa Lázaro and Manny's domino buddies. He'd always had a kind smile or a joke for Sierra, and whoever had painted his memorial portrait had captured that warmth perfectly. But

now, his face seemed twisted with shock somehow, eyebrows raised, the edges of his mouth turned down beneath that unruly mustache.

The glistening painted tear trembled and slid out of the old man's eye and down his face.

Sierra gasped. "What the —!"

The scaffolding shivered. She looked down. Manny had one hand on a support beam, the other cupped around the phone earpiece he always had in. His head was bowed, shaking from side to side.

"When?" Manny said. "How long ago?"

Sierra looked one last time at Papa Acevedo and climbed down the scaffolding.

"You are sure?" Manny looked up at her and then back down. "You're sure it was him?"

"You okay?" Sierra whispered.

"I'll be right there. Ya. Ya vengo, ahora mismo. Dentro de . . . quince minutos. Okay." Manny poked the button on his earpiece and stared at the ground for a few seconds.

"What happened?" Sierra asked.

"Reporter stuff," Manny said. He closed his eyes. Besides being the self-appointed Domino King of Brooklyn, he published, wrote, and delivered the *Bed-Stuy Searchlight*, churning out the three pages of local gossip and event updates from a little basement printing press over on Ralph Avenue. The *Searchlight* had been coming every day for as long as Sierra could remember.

“Somebody you know?”

Manny nodded. “Knew. Ol’ Vernon, we called him. He’s gone.”

“Dead?”

He nodded, shook his head, nodded again.

“Manny? What does that mean?”

“I have to go, Sierra. You finish this painting, you hear me?”

“What? Tonight? Manny, I . . .”

“No! Ha.” He looked at her, finally smiled. “Of course not. Just, soon.”

“Okay, Manny.”

In a flurry of jangling keys and heavy breathing, Manny shut down the industrial lights and let them out of the iron fence around the Junklot. “Have a good time tonight, Sierra. Don’t worry about me. But be careful!”

Sierra’s phone buzzed as she watched Manny rush off into the Brooklyn night. It was Bennie again.

You comin right?

Sierra texted a quick *yeh* and pocketed her phone. An early summer breeze wafted through her hair as she fast-walked past brownstones and corner stores, rounded the corner onto Lafayette, and headed home. She had to get ready for the party and check on Grandpa Lázaro, but all she could think about was Papa Acevedo’s teardrop.