

SIERRA SANTIAGO AND THE INVISIBLE CITY

(ROUGH DRAFT)

CHAPTER 1

Seven minutes to go.

Just seven minutes, by the slow ticking clock on the wall, and summer stretched out like the endless fields of Prospect Park. So why was Mr. Albridge still bumbling along some other droll of a lecture like it matters? Why couldn't the clock move a little faster?

Sierra gazed around the room: in the next seat over, her best friend Bennie bobbed up and down in the endless slow-mo head bang of the unconscious. Ysenia scribbled a note to Emani, who silently mouthed out phrases from her newest rhyme. And Robbie—Sierra allowed her gaze to hang on Robbie for three reverent ticks of the wall clock before looking quickly away—Robbie was drawing as usual, sketching winding swirls and hidden letters into another page of his math notebook. Big Malik and Little Malik were both staring at Mr. Albridge but Sierra could tell they were really plotting out some mischief for the party at Sully's later that night. She shot a timid glance back over to Robbie and noticed he was not drawing now but gazing intently out the classroom window at that monstrosity of a building, looming and windowless, that they called the Vault.

Kids at PS 291 in downtown Brooklyn probably spent more time telling dumb stories about the Vault than doing anything else. All kinds of people were said to have disappeared into its depths and never returned. Both Maliks swore up and down that it had a rocket ship or missile inside it (“That’s why there’s no windows! It’s really a launch pad!”) and several people claimed it was guarded by a squadron of blind ex-marines who let out blood curdling howls to alert each other of intruders. Even Mr. Albridge had added to the local mythology of the place, claiming to have once seen an extra tall figure silhouetted against the dark sky late one night after leaving a long-running PTA meeting.

But now Albridge was going on at length on some much more mundane topic, something about the founding fathers and going to bed at a reasonable hour. Sierra let her restless thoughts drift back over the past week. It’d been a strange one that only seemed to get stranger as the weekend drew near. Maybe it was just the excitement of her last days of 9th grade, the smell of pizza, fried chicken, sun on the hot pavement and the sound of smiling people out in the street, but something, *something* a little off kilter was going on...

First there was the problem with the murals. They just wouldn’t stay still. Sierra passed six on her morning skateboard ride to school, some of them memorials to friends and family who’d died, some scenic landscapes, some just tags and abstract shapes. But all of them have been changing, just ever so slightly, from day to day. The faces, one of them Bennie’s big brother Vincent who was killed three years earlier, all

seemed to be gazing with curiosity toward downtown Brooklyn where Sierra's school was. By Wednesday even the jagged shapes and fluid word loops had begun to gather and point toward the downtown edges of their walls. It reminded Sierra of the faces people make when they're staring down the tunnel on the train platform, waiting for that light to come around the bend.

And then there was the smoke. Late Wednesday night Sierra rounded a corner onto Lafayette on her way home from Bennie's, and there it was: a single plume, rising up from about five feet off the sidewalk. Really, if it hadn't been for the whole business of the murals changing around, Sierra would've just ignored it. But the unmistakable smell of Malagueñas filled the air and absolutely no one, not a soul, was around to account for it. The street was empty.

Finally, there was her grand-tío Lázaro. The thick aroma of cigar smoke immediately reminded her of him because his little apartment upstairs always had that smell, as if he had had those little air freshening hangy things made to send out the scent of his favorite tabacos from the island. Sierra's grand-tío Lázaro had always been a kind of mystery to her; a nasty stroke four years ago left him bed-bound and mostly nonsensical. With Sierra's much older brother Jimmy off in Afghanistan and slightly older brother Juan away getting famous with his salsa/thrasher band, their mom had put her in charge of keeping things orderly in Tío Lázaro's apartment. Only thing was that the place managed to stay quite neat and tidy all by itself, so Sierra got used to going up there and half-tidying up for forty-five minutes every other day while her uncle chuckled and sang old Puerto Rican songs to her. But this week—this crazy week, old

man Lázaro sat up suddenly and looked Sierra right in the eye, something that hadn't happened once in the four years since his stroke. He seemed to want to say something, almost spoke, but then just chuckled and lay back down. Sierra got completely creeped out, finished her fake clean up early and quickly retreated back downstairs to pretend everything was normal.

She looked up at the clock—four minutes and thirty seconds. She wanted to scream, could almost see herself sailing out the classroom on her faithful skateboard, careening down the hallway, out the school door and into the warm embrace of summer. Summer in Brooklyn was t-shirts and shorts and no more sticky school clothes and boys out on the streets and no waking up at stupid six in the morning and overnights at Bennie's and popsicles from Carlos' corner store and water fights around open hydrants and hours and hours of just skating and skating and skating and nothing else. Starting it all off was a party at Sully's, where Robbie would almost definitely be, even if he'd be shy and withdrawn as usual. Speaking of Robbie, why was he still staring out at The Vault? The boy looked downright fascinated, his skinny braids pulled back into a ponytail, a few stragglers framing his dark brown face.

With a minute and a half to go, Sierra looked down at her black jeans and the crazy screaming face on her t-shirt. She wondered if she was too fat or skinny or goth or boring for Robbie. She tried as hard as she could not to care if she was too dark skinned or light skinned, if her hair was too curly or too fine, if he saw all those bracelets clanking around the leather band on her wrist. She'd never let what other kids thought

get in the way of her style, always prided herself on being just herself, Sierra Santiago, and if anyone didn't like it they could walk on by. But then came Robbie. A mid-year transfer from Stuyvesant, he had a skinny butt and loping stride, a Brooklynese mixed with Creole way of speaking, and what seemed like one endless labyrinth of liquidy hip hop letters sketched across all his notebooks, textbooks, pants and backpacks, not to mention any desk he happened to be sitting at or near.

To break the tension, Sierra reached her pen towards her best friend's still-bobbing head and tried to ever-so-slowly place it in her ear.

The sound of a boy yelling came from outside the window. The voice was terrified- the way people holler in horror movies when they're getting eaten.

Bennie's head shot up, Sierra's pen clattered to the floor. After an eerie silence Sierra heard the most horrible howling she'd ever heard in her life.

It sounded human and not at the same time.

It kept getting louder and louder.

It came from the Vault.

SHADOWSHAPER

(FINAL DRAFT)

Chapter 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?"

Sierra looked back at the mural. She hadn't been making it up: a single tear glistened at the corner of Papa Acevedo's squinted eyes. It 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 painting, it took Sierra a few seconds to find the old man's face peering out from the concrete. But fading murals and crying murals were totally different flavors of weird.

"Manny?"

"¿Qué cosa, Sierra?"

She looked harder at the tear but it wouldn't go away, wasn't a trick of the fading afternoon light. But how...?

"Sierra? What is it?"

"Nothing." She turned back to her own painting, on a much newer concrete façade adjacent to the old brick building Papa Acevedo's face stared out of. "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."

"Great." The Tower had shown up just over a year ago, totally unannounced: a four-story concrete monstrosity on a block otherwise full of brownstones. They built it quick, and its northern wall sat right on the edge of the Junklot, where mountains of trashed cars waited like crumpled up scraps of paper for someone to repair them. Manny and the other old guys that played dominos there 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 outlines, 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 came asking her to paint something, she'd refused at first. 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? It seemed impossible and exciting all at the same time. If she messed up, all of Bed-Stuy would see it. But Manny was persistent, said she could paint anything she wanted, said

he'd set up a scaffolding, that if her old Grandpa Lázaro was still talking in full sentences instead of laid up from that stoke 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. She added a few more scales along the wings. It was the second day of summer, the icky cramped feeling of being stuck in a classroom all day was still fading from Sierra's body and the next three months stretched ahead like the sun soaked fields of Prospect Park.

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

party at sully's tonight. First 1 of the summmmmer!!!! Imma meet you at your house be ready in an hour.

The first party of the summer was always amazing. Everyone would be so excited, that collective sigh of having made it through another school year, bristling with the anticipation of all that lay ahead. Sierra smiled, pocketed her phone and started packing her supplies up. The dragon could wait. She looked back at the mural of Papa Acevedo, barely visible at all against the crumbling brick wall. It wasn't just that there was a tear, 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 joke for Sierra, and whoever had painted his memorial portrait had captured that warmth perfectly. But now, Papa Acevedo's face seemed wide open somehow, eyebrows raised, the edges of his mouth turned down beneath that unruly mustache.

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

Sierra gasped. "What the – !"

The scaffolding shivered. Sierra 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?"

She looked one last time at Papa Acevedo, shook her head and climbed down the scaffolding.

"You are sure?" He looked up at her, shook his head. Looked 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. Ok." 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, Manny published, wrote and delivered the Bed-Stuy *Searchlight*. He churned 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?"

Manny 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! Haha." 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 again as she watched Manny rush off into the Brooklyn night. It was Bennie.

You comin right?

Sierra texted a quick *yeh* and pocketed her phone. She started walking. The mural had cried. Was she losing her mind? She still had to get ready for the party and check on Grandpa Lázaro, but all she could think about was Papa Acevedo's teardrop. An early summer breeze wafted through Sierra's hair as she fastwalked past brownstones and corner stores, rounded a corner onto Lafayette and headed home.