

# ONE

The noise wakes up the entire building. It's louder than loud, like a firecracker.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm out of bed. My parents are already in the dark living room.

None of our neighbors dare go out into the hallway. Instead, they stay behind their doors asking questions through the cracks.

“What's going on out there?” Mr. Brown, from apartment 2C, asks. His voice sounds croaky with sleep.

“Everything okay?” That sounds like Mrs. Lawrence. She's really old and lives by herself in 2F. I imagine her hunched over by the door with her hand on the doorknob, listening for an answer.

A woman is screaming and there's some loud crying.  
It starts and stops like a car trying to jump to life.

My best friend, Kayla, lives upstairs near the roof door, so I hope whatever is happening isn't coming from there. When my father grabs his baseball bat, I know he's also worried. “It's June, too early for firecrackers,” he says.

“That was a gunshot.”

“Oh, no,” my mother says. There have been shootings in other buildings around here, but this is the first time it's happened where I live.

My teeth start to chatter. I can't make them stop, not even when I clench them. “Daddy, please move away from the door. They might shoot again.” It comes out funny and I have to say it a second time. But instead of moving, he looks through the peephole. Every apartment in the projects has one. My mother tells me never to open the door without looking through it first.

“Be careful,” my mother says.

“Don't worry, I will.” Dad presses his ear against our door. “Maybe someone needs help. I'll go see if there's anything I can do.”

“But I don't hear any noise now. Do you?” I whisper, watching for his thick eyebrows to answer me first. “Do you? Maybe whatever it was is over now. It could be, right? Let's just go back to bed.” He doesn't move. “Please!”

My mother shushes me and leads me to the couch.

I bring my knees to my chin and stretch my nightgown over my legs. My mother sits next to me and holds my hand.

“I have to go see if everything is okay, Dellie,” my father says, unlocking the door.

“No, you might get hurt! You don't know who's out there.”

“She's right, it's not a good idea,” my mother says, tightening her grasp on my hand. “I need you to stay where I know you're safe.”

“I'll be okay,” he says, opening the door and letting the hallway light flood the room. The veins in his hands bulge as he grips the bat.

“Dad, no! That can't stop a bullet.” Panic pushes its way into my head and causes a quiet terror inside me. The air has been sucked out of the room and I can't catch my breath no matter how hard I try. My eyes go blurry and I can't see. I don't want to do this again. Please, make it stop.

“I'll be fine. Lock the door after I leave. I won't be long,” my father says, stepping into the hallway.

The room feels darker now that my father is on the other side of the door.

After my mother locks up, she turns a lamp on and then dusts my brother Louis's picture.

My great-grandmother's rosary beads are draped over the frame. They're from Puerto Rico and are very old. The last time we visited my relatives in Puerto Rico, my aunt Evie tried to give us another set, but my mother refused. She said new ones don't hold as much power as old ones do.

Angel figurines and a white candle surround my brother's smiling face. Mom dusts the picture twice a day and each time I wonder if my parents think I'm to blame.

We sit together on the couch and hold hands for a long time. Even though they're getting sweaty, I won't let go. Not until my father comes back.

“Where is he?” my mother whispers.

Somewhere, a door slams and we jump. My heart is racing. Another door, then loud talking fills the hallway.

My father's voice is nowhere in any of the noise.

“It doesn't take this long to see if somebody needs help, Mom,” I say, looking at my brother's picture. “You know right away.”

As soon as the police sirens go from low and faraway to loud and close, the panic lets go of me. They're almost here, which means my father won't have to help anymore.

When the police cars are right outside our building, blue and red streaks dance all over our living room, even across my mother's worried face.

After a few minutes, there's a knock on the door. I know it's my father because he always knocks the same way. Seven taps in a row, like a song just starting, but my mother still looks through the peephole to be sure.

“Are you okay?” my mother says, squeezing my father tight.

“Yes, I'm fine.”

“What happened?” I ask.

“Someone fired a gun into one of the doors on the first floor, but, thank God, no one was hurt. We can all go back to sleep now.”

There's no way I'll be able to sleep, thinking about the bullet and what could've happened if it was our door.

After Mom and Dad tuck me in, their hushed voices go on until the birds start chirping. I guess I'm not the only one who can't sleep.

## TWO

I'm lying on my bed listening to music after school when somebody knocks lightly on our door. At first I think it's Kayla, but she never knocks so softly. I turn the radio off and hear it again. I don't see anything through the peephole but then there's another knock, and a small voice.

“Do you have a piece of bread for me?” I think it's Corey. I've heard him asking other people in our building for food a couple of times. He and his mother moved in on the first floor last month. It was their apartment door that last night's bullet got buried in.

My father's bat is still sitting in the corner.

When I open the door, the bat falls and bounces against the floor. Corey covers his head and crouches down. “It's just my father's baseball bat,” I say.

Corey straightens up and I see his clothes haven't been washed in a while. His white shirt has brown stains on it and his pants have dry mud on the hems.

Corey lets a smile escape.

His teeth are like pieces of white chewing gum, the way my brother's teeth used to look.

“Where's your mother?” I ask him.

He looks down at the floor and shrugs his bony shoulders.

“Why are you always hungry?”

When Corey looks up, I see that tears are sitting in his eyes waiting to drop. “Because there's nothing to eat in my house,” he answers. Then he looks at Mr. Brown's door. “Mr. Brown gives me stuff to eat, but he didn't answer his door today.”

Corey needs more than just a piece of bread. He's much skinnier than Louis was. Louis loved to eat.

“How about a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?”

Corey rubs his belly with both hands. “Yes!”

I'm not allowed to have any company when my parents aren't home, but I don't think they'll mind since the company is just a hungry little boy.

“Man, you're rich, right?” Corey asks, looking around at our things.

“No,” I say, trying to see our apartment the way Corey is seeing it. It's clean and we have what we need, but nothing else.

Corey watches me make us sandwiches. I make his thicker than mine and pour two glasses of milk.

“I don't like milk,” he says.

“How about if I make yours chocolate milk?”

He pokes a finger out from each hand and pumps them into the air. “Yes!” He laughs.

Corey wiggles into a kitchen chair and eats his sandwich right away. While he chews, he hums just like Louis used to and that sets panic into motion. My chest feels tight, and my breath comes too quick. With shaky hands, I pull out a seat.

“Hey,” Corey nudges my arm.

“What's the matter with you?”

“Nothing,” I say after a minute.

“Are you sure? ‘Cause I'm five years old and I've got big muscles. See?” He flexes his arms and puffs out his little chest. “I can help.”

“Thanks, but I'm fine now.” I smile.

“Okay. So, how old are you?” Corey asks.

“I'm thirteen.”

“And what's your name?”

“Delilah, but everybody just calls me Dellie.”

“Who? Everybody like your friends?”

“Yup.”

He sits forward. “Can I call you Dellie and be your friend too?” he asks, watching me closely.

I almost say no, but he's got jelly on his chin and he's swinging his legs and I think he's cute. “Okay.”

“Yes!” he says.

“You sure like to say yes a lot, huh?”

Corey looks to the ceiling and giggles. “Yes.”

After a few seconds, his name rings through the hallway. “Corey! Corey!” his mother calls. He quiets down right away, like he's been caught doing something bad. His fun turns off like it has a switch. “I gotta go now, Dellie.”

He hops off the chair and wipes his mouth on his sleeve. “I'll come up and see you again, okay?”

“Okay,” I say, opening the door for him.

He runs down the stairs, calling, “Here I am, Mommy,” over and over.