

When These Walls Come Tumbling Down

Darcy traveled down the sidewalk, her backpack pulling on her left shoulder. Men in tailored suits and women pinched by pencil skirts flew by, the air they displaced brushing against Darcy's neck and shoulders. Perfumes and aftershaves mingled with the stench of the Hudson River. Darcy checked her watch, wrinkling her nose.

8:17. Oops. It's just Mateo, she thought. He probably won't even be there yet.

Even so, she picked up her pace as she crossed Liberty, her head whipping from side-to-side to make sure no cars came upon her unexpectedly. She had to be extra alert when the streets were this busy. The dark wood and iron handles of the café doors welcomed her as she reached the other side. She crossed the courtyard, pulled open the doors, and smiled. The scent of rich coffee and cream cheese pastries flooded her senses. The place wasn't too busy. She scanned the room and, surprisingly, spotted Mateo already in a booth... wearing a *suit*. Had he combed his hair? His face brightened as he waved her over. She set her backpack on the seat and slid into the booth, her mind wandering.

Mateo's finger tapping on the table captured her attention.

Sorry, she signed, looking up. *Distracted*. Darcy sat up and directed her focus to Mateo.

What's wrong? he signed hesitantly, his umber eyes flashed with concern. He's still not very confident in his signing, Darcy noticed. But she wasn't very confident in talking either. She shrugged.

Good, she replied. *I still haven't decided what to paint for the final in Keller's class.*

Mateo smiled at her mischievously.

He puffed out his chest and suggested, *Why don't you paint me? I look pretty good in this suit.*

She snorted and signed, *I don't think so. I need to paint something meaningful.*

His face twisted and he made a dagger-to-the-heart gesture. Darcy rolled her eyes. *Why the suit?* she asked.

Mateo's eyes flicked to her left and she turned to see a waitress approaching the table. Darcy fixed her eyes on the waitress's mouth, hoping she wouldn't miss a word.

"What can I get you for you, hon?"

The waitress's gum impeded Darcy's lip reading. Here we go, Darcy resigned. She focused, ensuring her tongue was in the right spot, and replied, "Can I get a hot sixteen-ounce dirty chai latte and a croissant, please?"

Darcy thought the waitress had said, "A hot dirty chai?"

Darcy nodded. The waitress smiled and nodded back, then turned to Mateo. Darcy glanced away. Maybe staring at the artwork in the corner for long enough would allow her to meld into it and disappear. The painting contained a subway car layered in vibrant orange and purple graffiti. That's a style I haven't tried yet, Darcy thought. It would be fun to experiment. But that still doesn't answer the question of *what* I should paint.

Mateo waved to get her attention. *That was good! Your words were really clear.* Darcy eyed him doubtfully, raising an eyebrow.

Promise, he signed. She nodded, still not entirely believing him. Mateo leaned over the table and pointed at the painting Darcy had been studying.

Graffiti art? For the final? he inquired.

Maybe, she admitted, frowning, *but I still don't know what to paint.* Mateo appeared pensive for a moment.

He met Darcy's eyes. *Like you said. Make something meaningful. But make it meaningful to you. It's your art.*

Darcy furrowed her brow. *But other people have to think it's meaningful, too.*

What makes you think they won't?

Darcy sighed. *So? Why the suit?* she said, changing the subject.

Mateo chuckled, glancing down at his crimson tie and gray suitcoat. A stray curl rested on his tawny forehead.

The interview, he explained.

Right, thought Darcy. Her face shifted to mock surprise. *You mean you actually found someone who wants to hire you?*

Shut up.

She smirked at Mateo, their eyes lingering on each other.

Darcy jumped slightly as the waitress reappeared with their orders. Mateo stopped signing and took his cup. Darcy accepted the croissant and her own steaming cup, the heat spreading through her fingertips. She removed the cup lid and inhaled, engulfed in the spiced aroma. Mateo thanked the waitress, then turned back to Darcy, who had taken a considerable bite of the flaky croissant.

Switch?

Switch, she agreed. They exchanged drinks, their fingers brushing briefly. Mateo's iced latte chilled her warm hands as she took a sip from the straw. Darcy grinned.

You and your raspberry white chocolate, she chuckled.

You and your chai, he retorted. Darcy took her cup back as Mateo checked his watch.

Darcy set down the coffee and asked, *When is the interview?*

8:45, he replied, *but I want to be early.*

Darcy nodded, examining her own watch.

8:32.

I should get back. I want to get some homework done before class.

Mateo rolled his eyes. *Overachiever*, he joked. Darcy ripped a piece off her croissant and stuffed it in her mouth.

I'm not the one in a suit.

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Darcy's stomach rumbled as she trekked back to the university. She had given the other half of her croissant to Mateo and she had started to regret it. But her backpack felt lighter after seeing Mateo. Maybe *she* felt lighter.

On the other side of Fulton, a man in a beanie held a saxophone to his lips. His expression shifted and intensified, his fingers deliberate on the keys. The morning sun glinted on the brass as Darcy passed by, a smile etched on her face. That'd be a good painting, she thought as she approached the corner.

The ground lurched and trembled beneath her. Darcy stumbled into the side of a building, the latte dousing her Frida Kahlo t-shirt. She righted herself and glanced around. No one in the street moved. Some wore blank looks while others covered their mouths with their hands. One pulled out a camera. A feeling of foreboding crashed into Darcy. She turned warily, expecting a car wreck.

Smoke and flames billowed out of one of the Twin Towers.

It looked like something had ripped a hole in the side of the building, near the top. A few people whipped out their flip phones and began dialing. The rest of the group just stared. Darcy

couldn't tear her eyes away. Coffee dripped from her shaking hands. Her mind felt sluggish, but then, out of the sludge, a single thought possessed her.

Mateo's interview. It was in there. Mateo's in there. Mateo.

A switch flipped, and Darcy could move again.

Her fingers fumbled as she yanked her phone out of her jeans. The metal felt sticky as she messaged Mateo. People ran. Some ran toward the fire, maybe to find loved ones, but most fled the other way. What floor was he on? When was his appointment again? Several police cars raced past, lights flashing urgently. Maybe he was in the other tower. Maybe he was late for the interview. In her heart, Darcy knew Mateo lay in the blazing, blackened building.

Mateo never saw her message.

Three months later, the dust had settled, the airports had started running again, and Darcy stood outside the Pace University art building, swapping the dust brown can for the chocolate brown. She climbed back up the ladder, spray can in hand, to put the finishing touches on the eyes. The deepest, warmest cocoa irises. Darcy caressed his cheek with her thumb, moving in small rhythmic circles, her finger catching on the rough brick. She sprayed a few more lines to capture depth, then slid back down the ladder and backed away.

From the wall, Mateo smiled at her, the corners of his eyes seeming to crinkle further. Wild curls rested on his forehead. He raised his arm slightly, his pinky, index finger, and thumb pointing upward while his middle and ring fingers lay folded against his palm. She imitated the sign to the mural. *I love you.*

Mateo was right. She just needed to paint something meaningful to her. And she had.