

*New York Times* bestselling author

**RENÉE WATSON**



BLOOMSBURY

WHAT MOMMA  
LEFT ME

**RENÉE  
WATSON**

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# OUR FATHER

I don't have many good memories of my daddy.  
He was hardly home.  
And when he was,  
he was mad  
at my momma,  
or me,  
or my younger brother, Danny.  
Always yelling about what wasn't done right,  
what wasn't done at all,  
what he was going to do.  
He bought me gifts though.  
Always on Christmas, on Valentine's Day, and  
on my birthday.  
He gave me this diary two months ago, when I  
turned thirteen.

I never thought about writing in it until now.  
I need a place to put these secrets.  
They're too heavy for me to carry alone.

Grandma says I am just like my momma. She says I look like her, talk like her, act like her. My chocolate eyes, crayon-brown skin, and skinny, knock-kneed legs are the same as my momma's when she was my age. "Serenity, girl, if I didn't know better I'd think this was a picture of my Loretta," Grandma says, holding up my school photo. I think she is sad but also glad that even though she can't see her own child anymore, she can always look at me.

Danny, my brother, looks like my daddy—tall, dark skinned, and skinny no matter how much he eats. He is one year younger than me. He'll be starting the seventh grade. I'm starting the eighth. I don't mind us being just like our parents on the outside. But I'm scared that maybe we're like them on the inside too.

Danny has my daddy's temper. Just yesterday, he punched the wall because he couldn't find his hat. He was mad at me, thinking I hid it. He made a mess looking for it—clothes thrown all over the floor. Then he remembered that he had put it in the closet. Busted knuckles for nothing.

Danny also has my daddy's style—expensive, name-brand shoes, baggy jeans, oversized shirts. Momma

always said, “Boy, you’re a carbon copy of your father.” She never sounded happy when she said it.

Sometimes I wonder if all children are like their parents. I think about having a different momma and a different daddy. I think, maybe if I wasn’t the daughter of Loretta and Daniel Evans Sr. everything that happened this summer would change.

But I am Serenity Evans and nothing can change that.

I think sometimes my daddy wants everything to change too. I know he doesn’t like being a father. He’s never said it, but I just know. I know because there are no pictures of him holding me when I was a baby. I know because he never came to any of my school plays or recitals. He is always gone—running the streets, my momma would say. She made excuses for him, trying to convince us that he really did care, but I think even she stopped believing her lies.

I think Momma realized that no matter how many good qualities there are in my daddy, there are more bad. One night when I woke up thirsty, I got out of bed to get a drink of water. I stopped just before I got to the kitchen when I saw my daddy and my brother, Danny, sitting at the kitchen table. They were stuffing small plastic bags with green plants. Daddy said, “One day, Lil Shorty, I’ll take you out with me and show you how *this* green brings you *this* green.” He took a wad of money out of his pocket

and tossed it on the table. Danny picked up the bills in amazement.

I turned around and went back to bed. I never told anyone. I knew my momma would just cuss and fuss at my dad and then he'd get mad and they'd fight. Then my dad would leave for a few a days, like he always does after they fight—to give my mom some space and clear his head, he says. Whenever Momma would question him about where he was staying, he'd tell her as long as the rent was paid she didn't need to worry about it. And they'd argue again and he'd leave, so I just kept my mouth shut about Danny helping my daddy.

I'm really good at keeping secrets. I still haven't told any of my momma's.

I know better than to tell these things to anybody. No good would come of it. And besides, Momma always told me not to go telling our family's business. "What happens in this house, stays in this house," she'd always say.

Not anymore.

Now that momma's gone, our secrets are getting out and our house is empty because two kids can't live alone. And this is another reason why I know my dad doesn't care about us. I know because he hasn't come home. I don't even know if he knows my momma is dead. I wonder what he will do when he comes home to an empty house.

# WHICH

Grandma Mattie wants us.  
I do not like her.  
She is my daddy's mother.  
Her house has no pictures of my momma.  
She tells the social worker  
there's room for us at her place.  
But we want to live with  
Grandpa James and Grandma Claire.  
They are my momma's parents.  
Their house is full of pictures of our momma.

I haven't been back to the house since my momma died.  
At first, I am scared to go in, but once Grandpa James's  
car pulls up and we see that the news and neighbors and



strangers are all gathered around the house waiting for us, I just want to run inside. Grandpa stops and talks to some of them. There are reporters from the *Portland Observer* and the *Oregonian* scribbling in their tablets as Grandpa speaks. “My family would like to thank the Portland community for your prayers and support. We appreciate your kindness.” For the past three days people have been sending food, flowers, cards, and money to Grandpa James and Grandma Claire’s house. Especially people from Restoration Baptist Church, where my grandpa is the pastor. My momma grew up in that church, but by the time she had me she stopped going.

Grandma walks past the crowd, grabbing us by our hands, squeezing mine tight, and rushes us to the house. Grandma’s hands are soft and her nails are always painted with clear nail polish. She dresses in the nicest clothes and sometimes she lets me play in her soft, wooly hair. I like to comb through the silver and black strings, braid them, and see the new patterns the gray makes.

Grandma is a big woman. Wide hips and thick legs. She says it’s from having babies and cooking all those good family recipes. Grandma says cooking and baking is a family heirloom passed down from her mother’s mother. She caters for weddings and all kinds of special events. My momma cooked too. Momma promised me that one day she’d teach me how to make a red velvet cake and all the other secret family recipes, but now that she’s gone, she can’t.

Grandma squeezes my hand tighter the closer we get to the door. Even though my momma always entered the house through the side door, we go in the front. I am glad I don't have to walk into the kitchen.

"You two just need to pack enough clothes for the week. Your grandpa and I will come back later for everything else," Grandma tells us. "And bring your games too," she says, eyeing Danny's video games and controllers. They are scattered on the floor in the living room. I remember that the day my momma died, Danny was sitting on the living room floor, with his back against the bottom of the sofa, playing video games. The TV was loud, as if the war on the screen was happening in our living room. I remember my momma telling me to tell Danny to turn the game off.

"Serenity, honey, did you hear me?" Grandma taps me on my shoulder and I shake the picture out of my head and look at her. "I asked you where the suitcases are kept," she repeats.

"In the closet in my momma's room," I tell her. Grandma walks down the hallway to my parents' room. When she walks inside, she starts weeping. I turn the television on because I don't like the sounds of her sadness.

The news is on and a picture of my momma, the one taken of her last Christmas, is showing on the screen. A reporter says, "Loretta Evans will be laid to rest Thursday morning—"

That's all I hear because Grandma comes in the living room and snatches the remote out of my hand. She turns the TV off. "I don't want you watching the news! You hear me?" She is asking me questions but I know I am not supposed to answer. I don't know why Grandma is yelling at me and why she doesn't want me to see the news. I already know the things they are going to say. "No TV, you understand? No TV unless I am in the room!" Grandma is yelling and crying and I start to cry too. Not because she is yelling at me, but because I am not used to seeing her this way.

"Sorry, Grandma." My voice must sound like I feel—scared and confused.

Grandma takes my hand. She looks down at me and says, "Serenity, I didn't mean to yell at you. I—I just don't want you and Danny seeing those images over and over again."

"But, Grandma, the news has nothing to do with it," I tell her. "I see those images all the time in my dreams."

Grandma looks at me, tears in her eyes, and for the first time in her whole life I think she doesn't know what to say.

Grandpa comes in the house. He is just as wide as Grandma, but taller. "What's that for?" he asks Grandma. And then I notice that Grandma has one of my momma's dresses folded across her arm. The white one she bought two weeks ago. She thought it cost too much but decided to buy it anyway. To treat herself, she said, as we walked

to the checkout. Then, when the cashier rang it up, we found out it was on sale. Momma was so happy she bought herself a matching purse.

“I’ll dress her tomorrow,” Grandma says. “For the casket.”

I don’t know why, but I am really angry when I hear this. Angry that my momma has been in the same clothes for three days. I go to my room and pack my clothes. Even though Grandma said to only pack for a week, I put in extra. Just in case something happens.

“Serenity?” Danny knocks on the door just as I zip my overnight bag. His eyes are red and puffy from crying; he talks like all his energy has run away. Like when he was sick last winter with the flu.

“Huh?”

“Should I take my Goldfish?”

“What?”

“My crackers for snack time. Should I take them?”

“If you want to,” I say.

Danny just stands there. “Will you get them for me?”

I look at him, standing there. “Where’s Grandma?”

“Taking my suitcase to the car,” he answers.

“Where’s Grandpa?”

“Helping Grandma make room in the trunk,” Danny says.

I turn the light out and close the door. “Come on,” I say. We walk toward the kitchen. Danny is behind me. The closer I get to the kitchen, the more my heart beats

my insides. My stomach flips upside down and my hands are sweating. I remember feeling like this last Halloween when Danny and I went trick or treating with our cousins Brian and Michael.

The woman who lives in the house at the end of the block had a fake coffin in her yard and played a recording of scary noises howling through the bushes. I was scared to go up to the door, but I did it anyway. I wanted the candy.

But this is different. I don't want to be brave. I want Danny to say that he doesn't care about the Goldfish crackers that Momma bought him for his snack. But instead he says in a small voice, "They'll get stale if we don't eat them."

And I remember how mad my daddy got when the milk spoiled because we hadn't drunk it fast enough. He made my momma drink it. "Ain't no wastin' food in this house!" Daddy kept screaming as he forced the glass of milk to her mouth. Momma got sick and we were careful never to waste food again.

I walk to the end of the living room and stand in the dining room. The kitchen will be next. Grandpa comes inside. "Your grandma's waiting in the car. You two ready?" he asks.

I look at Danny. He says, "Can you get my snack crackers from the pantry?"

Grandpa looks at us. "You want anything else?"

We shake our heads.

Grandpa goes into the kitchen without hesitation, like a superhero. I hear him rummaging through the pantry and then the cabinet door slams shut. “Sure you don’t need something else?”

Then I think to ask for one more thing. “Can you bring me the plaque?”

“What plaque?”

“The prayer that hangs over the stove. Do you see it?”

I hear Grandpa strain as he reaches for it, and I feel bad for asking an old man to work so hard. Grandma says he needs to take it easy since his heart attack last year. Grandpa comes out of the kitchen with a box of Goldfish crackers in one hand and the plaque in the other. The plaque is a thick square, dark brown trimmed in gold. Centered in the middle of the brown is a shiny gold square with black writing. The top of the plaque says *The Lord’s Prayer* and under it the scripture is printed in fancy writing.

Our Father which art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done,  
in earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil:

For thine is the kingdom, and the power,  
and the glory, forever. Amen.

The day Momma died, the only thing that made me feel better was saying that prayer. Momma said it whenever she was sad and lonely, so that day I stood in the kitchen, holding Danny's hand, and read the prayer over and over out loud until help came.

"Thank you," Danny and I say. Danny takes the crackers. He opens the box and starts eating them like they are the best thing he's ever tasted. I take the plaque, holding it tight. Grandpa turns off the lights and we leave.

"You two don't have to be afraid. You're safe with me," Grandpa says. "And, ah, we can go grocery shopping to get you some more snacks when those run out." We get into the car. I love Grandpa for this and I am glad he told the social worker that he wanted me and Danny because I want him too.

As we drive away, I think maybe we should have left a note for my dad. But I'm sure he'll know where to find us. Grandma turns and looks at us from the front seat. "Sweethearts, put your seat belts on." She sees the plaque in my hand and smiles. "Your mother's favorite scripture," she says. I read it to myself again and again the whole way to my new home.

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Momma's funeral is over and I am glad. I hated sitting at that church, in the front row, right in front of her casket. I hated the songs, the scriptures, the crying, the people telling me I would be okay. I hated the way Danny screamed when they opened the casket. The way he cried so hard, he slept all afternoon because he was too tired to do anything else. I hated the way my momma looked—like clay, like Play-Doh. I hated that she looked happy and peaceful, like she was glad she was gone. Like not living was what she wanted. I will never go to a funeral again and if I have to, I will not look in the casket. It is unfair that the dead have smiles on their faces and the living are left crying.

“Serenity! Danny!” Grandma shouts. “Come here, please,” she says. Danny and I walk into the kitchen. “Your grandfather and I want to talk with you.”

I sit down next to Danny, across from Grandma. Grandpa is sitting at the head of the table. He clears his throat. “Your grandma and I have thought about this, and we think it'll be best for all of us if you and Danny transfer from Eagle Creek to Rose City Academy.”

“Do we have to?” I ask.

Grandma says, “Yes, sweetheart. It's closer to the house. This way, if me or your grandfather can't pick you up, you two can walk home.”

“But all my friends go to Eagle Creek.” I can't believe I'm finally in the eighth grade and won't be able to take



advantage of this. At Rose City it won't matter that I'm an eighth grader, I'll be the new girl.

"Rose City Academy is a good school," Grandma says. "It'll get you prepared for high school." I can tell Grandma chose her words carefully. I know what she really means. Eagle Creek Middle School is always in the news and the paper because our test scores are low. "And there are no uniforms at Rose City Academy," she says.

Her tactic works on Danny. "Good," he says. "Those blue and white uniforms at Eagle Creek are ugly."

Grandma keeps listing reasons why Rose City Academy is a good school (trying to convince me), and finally she says in a soft voice, "We think it will be good for you to start over."

Start over. Maybe she's right. At a new school, I could avoid all the questions and the sad looks that people keep giving me because they know about my momma. At a new school, with new teachers and new friends, I can just be Serenity. Not Serenity who looks like her mother, Loretta. No one will know. Danny and I can just be.

"What about Daddy?" Danny asks.

Grandpa leans back in his chair. "What about him?"

"Will he know where we are? How is he going to find us when he comes back?"

Grandpa looks each of us in the eye, then speaks. "I don't think your father is coming back."

"Why?" I ask.

“It’s been a week. Don’t you think he would have contacted us by now?” Grandpa asks. It gets real quiet. The ticking of the clock is the only noise I hear.

Danny looks at me. I don’t know what to say. It must be true. Most of the time Grandpa is right.

# ART IN HEAVEN

I dream of her being in heaven.  
No more bruises.  
No more pain.  
She is the prettiest angel there.  
She has wings like the others,  
but Momma doesn't fly.  
She just sits at Jesus' feet  
'cause they haven't talked in a while.

I like living at Grandpa James and Grandma Claire's house. So many things are different here. Every house on the block is nice. All the yards are neat and there is no tall grass spilling over to the next-door neighbor's yard. There are no raggedy cars that don't work parked

in front of the houses and there are more houses than apartments or duplexes.

Danny and I share a room upstairs. There's a bathroom next to our room and across the hallway is Grandpa's home office. We don't know what to do with all this space. There is enough room for us to be on our own side and not even touch each other. My bed is on the right side of the room, against the wall, near a window. I pull the string to the blinds and let the sun come in.

"We should paint," Danny says. "This is a girl color."

"Yellow is not just for girls."

"Yes it is." Danny starts unpacking the rest of his clothes. We each have our own dresser. There's a big closet that we'll divide, and I think I'd like to hang some posters on the wall. Danny says, "We should paint it white. White is for boys and girls."

"Well, I'm not asking. You ask," I tell Danny.

"Fine," he says. He closes the drawer and starts to make his bed.

Grandma and Grandpa call us down for dinner. A big pot of spaghetti is on the stove and garlic bread is in the oven. After dinner we watch TV and finish unpacking. We are both so tired, Grandma doesn't even have to tell us to get ready for bed.

I get into bed first. When Danny is finished taking his bath, he comes into the bedroom, turns off the light, and gets into his bed. "Serenity?"

"Yes?"

“Do you think Grandpa is right about Daddy?”

“I don’t know.” I pull the covers over me and try to go to sleep.

“He’s been gone longer than a week before,” Danny says.

I sit up in the bed. “Do you want Daddy to come back for us?”

I can barely hear Danny’s answer. “Sometimes.”

I don’t say anything.

“I just want to tell him about Momma. Make sure he knows.”

“And then what?” I ask.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to live with him?” I ask.

“No,” Danny says without hesitating. “I just want to know if he knows about Momma.”

I lie back down.

“It’s only been a week. Last time he left, he was gone for four, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember,” I say. I turn over on my stomach.

Danny falls asleep.

The house is quiet and I can hear Grandma and Grandpa moving around downstairs. They go into their bedroom and close the door. They must not know that their voices rise through the vent. Whenever I am in our room I can hear everything that’s being said downstairs. I hear my grandma say, “James, I never thought I’d have to

bury one of our children.” I can tell she’s crying. Now that Momma is gone, Grandpa and Grandma only have two children. Uncle Brian and Aunt Sara.

Grandpa says, “We’re going to be okay, honey. We’re going to be okay.”

They are quiet for a long time. Too long. I don’t like it when it’s this quiet. My grandma is sniffing. “You should have Pastor Mitchell take over service for the next few Sundays.”

“Yeah,” Grandpa says. “Don’t feel much like preaching.” He sighs, then sobs come. “Help us, Father. Help us,” he prays.

I bury my head in my pillow, plugging my ears, like I used to do when my parents would fight. I don’t know which is worse, falling asleep listening to my momma and my daddy yell and argue, or my grandparents pray and weep.

I thought that one good thing about living with Grandpa and Grandma would be no more sleepless nights.

When morning comes, Grandma calls us down for breakfast. She’s baked biscuits, scrambled eggs, and fried ham in a skillet. Neither of them looks like they were crying last night. We sit down and eat.

“Slow down, Danny,” Grandma says. “That food’s not going anywhere.”

We laugh.

“It’s good,” Danny says. He grabs another biscuit from the basket in the middle of the table.

Grandpa takes a sip of his coffee and opens the newspaper. He closes it real fast and sets it on the table. Grandma says, “I read it earlier. Nothing new.” And I know there must be an article about my momma in the paper. And probably a picture too. And I get real mad. Mad that people are writing about my momma. Telling our secrets.

Grandma gets up from the table and begins to put the dishes in the dishwasher. “Serenity, I’m cooking your favorite for dinner tonight—teriyaki chicken wings and macaroni and cheese. Guess we should add a vegetable in there, huh? You want to help?”

“No.”

“But, Serenity, baby, you love to cook. You sure you don’t want to help?”

“No, not tonight.”

“You want to help make dessert? I’m thinking about making a red velvet cake.”

“No!” I yell. I don’t know why I am screaming and how these tears have come with no warning. “I don’t want to help you cook! I don’t want to help you bake! I don’t want to be sitting here in this stupid kitchen with you!” I leave the kitchen, go to my bedroom, and slam the door. Danny follows me upstairs. He’s crying too. Lately, he cries if I cry and I start up when he’s upset. We’ve cried so much

this past week, sometimes I think we'll use up all our tears. Danny goes into Grandpa's office.

I am sure Grandma is coming for us. She knows we're sad, but she does not allow screaming and slamming doors in her house. I know I will be in trouble for this. The tears streaming down my face are hot and all I want is to go back to the day my momma died. I want to go back to the moments right before and stay there.

I hear footsteps and think Grandma has come to fuss at me, but instead it's Grandpa and he goes into his office. I hear Grandpa tell Danny everything is going to be fine and that it's okay to cry. My daddy would disagree. He always told Danny to be a man, to never let anyone see him cry. One day when we were in elementary school, Danny fell off his bike. His knee was bleeding, and dirt and all kinds of small rocks got into the wound. The edges of his hands, right at his wrists, were scratched up and bleeding too, and my daddy asked him what he was crying for.

"You better man up! Stop all that cryin'. You a man, right?" Daddy used to tell Danny that if he didn't stop crying he was going to give him something to cry for. And here Grandpa is telling him it is okay to cry. "Go ahead, let it out," I hear Grandpa say. "If you don't, you'll be letting it out in other ways."

Danny whispers, "I miss her."

"I know. I do too." Grandpa and Danny go outside. Their voices trail off toward the back of the house. I think



Grandpa is showing Danny the car he is working on. He works on old cars in his garage. Danny's been helping him since he was old enough to pass tools.

The rest of the day goes by and I don't go down for dinner. I end up sleeping right past it. I think Grandma lets me stay asleep because she knows I have been having nightmares and losing sleep lately. I wake up in the middle of the night. Danny is snoring in the other bed. The sound of his soft purrs puts me right back to sleep.

Summer is going by faster than I thought it would. Sometimes the days drag on, but now it's the last weekend before school starts. The calendar that Danny hung on our bedroom wall is all marked up with Xs across each date. Four weeks have passed since my momma died. One month and my father still hasn't come for us. I'm starting to think that maybe my daddy does know about my mom. I think maybe he just doesn't care.

Danny swears he's not counting anymore. He says he never was. He says he was counting down the days till school started. Danny's never been excited about school, so I know that's a lie.

He's never been excited about church either. And so every Sunday morning it's like trying to get a hibernating bear to wake up. "Rise and shine!" Grandma says, knocking on our bedroom door. It's Sunday morning and it's time to get ready for church. We've been to church

more this summer than in my whole life. We go to church every Sunday—*all* day, and sometimes on weeknights too, if there's a special service or meeting. We also go on Saturday mornings. It seems like we'll be in church just as much as we'll go to school. And Grandpa says that's good. There is nothing more important than having God and education in your life, he says. With Grandpa being a pastor and Grandma a retired teacher there is no way we will fail at faith or academics.

Grandma sings in the choir, teaches Bible study, and is the organizer and head cook for the church's soup kitchen. That is why we are always at church. There is always a rehearsal, a meeting, a time of prayer, a Bible study, a youth group, a community service activity. Always something.

Danny does not like this, but I do. At church, I like the singing and I like reciting the memory verses. Grandma is impressed that I can memorize scriptures so well. She says that I should have no problem at my Rites of Passage—a ceremony where all the youth of the church are passed to the next level of leadership training. At the end of eighth grade I will be eligible to become a Teen Disciple. In order to move up to a Teen Disciple, I have to write a statement of faith, recite a passage of scripture, and complete a community service project. I'm thinking maybe one of my projects will have something to do with art. I've been liking all the art projects we do in Sunday school class.

We make art pieces inspired by the stories we learn in class. We've learned how to do printmaking and ceramics. Sometimes we draw or paint or make collages. Once I used Cray-Pas to illustrate Moses and the burning bush—oranges, reds, yellows, black smoke. Using water-colors, I painted Joseph and his coat of many colors—blues, purples, greens.

Today, we're not doing art. Miss Valerie, our Sunday school teacher, is standing at the front of the room with a DVD in her hand. "Okay, class," Miss Valerie says. "We're going to watch a video today." Miss Valerie goes to the DVD player and puts in a disk.

"This better be good!" I hear a girl say. I turn around and see a girl the color of caramel sitting behind me. Her jet black hair is long and curly. It looks like the kind that doesn't nap up when it gets wet. She moves my sweater from the empty chair next to me and slides her thin body through the row of chairs so she can sit beside me. "You know what I'm saying?" she continues. "This better not be about obeying our parents or saying no to drugs." She rolls her eyes and crosses her legs. "You're Pastor James's granddaughter, right?"

"Yes. My name is Serenity."

"I'm Maria," she says.

"You go to church here?" I ask.

"Yeah. I've been gone all summer visiting my grandparents in Mexico," she tells me. That explains her hair. "You know what this video is about?"

“No,” I say.

“Well, why not? You a PK, so you should know everything.”

“A PK?”

“Preacher’s Kid,” Maria says. “Or in your case, grand-kid.” She looks very disappointed. “Your mom and dad go here too?” she asks.

“No,” I tell her. “I don’t have parents.”

“Everybody has parents,” Maria says.

“Not me,” I tell her. She looks at me like she wants an explanation. A reason. I can’t tell the truth. Not to some girl I just met, not in the middle of a Sunday school class.

“Well, do you have any brothers or sisters?” Maria asks.

“One brother,” I say. I point to Danny.

Maria looks him over.

“He’s a year younger than me,” I tell her.

“I’m an only child. Just me and my mom,” Maria says.

“Well, and my dad. But he doesn’t live with us. He lives in Vancouver.” Maria digs in her purse and pulls out a pack of gum. She puts the watermelon-flavored square in her mouth and chews. “Want some?”

I take a piece, even though I know we aren’t supposed to chew gum in church.

“So, for real,” Maria says. “Where does your dad live?”

My palms start to sweat. “Northeast Portland.”

“You see him a lot?”

I tell the lie I heard my momma say to nosy people who'd ask her a bunch of questions about where my dad was. "He's out of town on business a lot," I say. I wonder where my dad really is. At home, every time the phone rings I think maybe it's him calling to say he's back. Calling to see where we are. But it never is.

Maria continues with the questioning. "What about your mom? How come you don't live with her?"

I bite my lip. "My mom died in a car accident," I lie.

Maria gives me those sad eyes everybody kept giving me at the funeral. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay," I lie again. I push out the memories I have of the day my momma died and I swallow the truth and keep my momma's secrets buried on the inside.

Miss Valerie stands at the front of the room. "Before we begin, class, I just want to remind everyone that there's no gum chewing in church."

Two girls and a boy spit their gum out in the garbage can. I slide mine to the back of my mouth, on the right side.

Miss Valerie turns the lights off. The DVD starts and a voice comes on that says, "Children, do you know what Ephesians 6 says? It admonishes you to obey your parents."

Maria sighs. "This is so stupid."

The DVD starts playing in slow motion and then it skips ahead. Miss Valerie turns the lights on and goes to the DVD player. "I don't know what's wrong with this

thing,” she says. She takes the disk out and wipes it on her skirt; then she puts it back in.

We start watching the DVD again. This time we get farther. A young boy is told by his parents not to ride his bike past a certain point, but he does it anyway. The little boy is in the middle of the street when a car comes speeding by. The DVD starts skipping forward again.

Miss Valerie turns the lights on. “Okay, what’s going on here?” She searches her desk for the remote control and realizes it’s not there. “Who has the remote?” Miss Valerie stands with her hands on her hips.

There are small sounds of giggling from behind me and I turn around. A row of boys are laughing and all of them have their hands in awkward places—in their pockets or tucked under their folded arms. I look at Danny, who is sitting in the last row next to a boy named Ricky. Ricky is the same age as Danny, but he is so tall that he looks older than all of us. His shirt is wrinkled and is tucked halfway into his khaki pants. His hair is braided straight back in cornrows and his lips are shining, like he put on too much ChapStick. Danny and Ricky are hiding their hands too. The only difference between them and other boys is they are the only ones not laughing. I know it’s them.

“I am very disappointed in you all,” Miss Valerie says. She is trying to sound older than she is. She is not a real teacher. She is in college and only graduated from high school last May. She makes us put “Miss” in front of her

first name because it shows respect, she says. But I think she just wants to seem important. “Do I have to check everyone’s hands?” Miss Valerie starts walking through the rows of metal chairs.

Those of us in the front hold our hands up with all ten fingers stretched wide. By the time she gets to the back I feel Maria tap me on my leg. I look down and she is tapping me with the remote. It has been passed from the back row. I turn around and Miss Valerie is standing in front of Danny and Ricky. Their hands are stretched open for her to see. “Put it on her desk,” Maria whispers.

I just look at her. I can’t do that. My grandmother could find out.

“Do it!” Maria whispers louder.

“No,” I whisper back.

Maria looks over her shoulder. “She won’t know it was you,” she says. She hands me the remote.

I take it and run on my tippy-toes to Miss Valerie’s desk. I put it next to her Bible and rush back to my seat before she turns around. Maria nudges me. “Stop looking so guilty.”

Two girls, Karen and Sabrina, are sitting at the end of our row and they can’t stop laughing. Soon we are all laughing and I wonder if God thinks this is funny.

Miss Valerie comes to the front of the room and begins to lecture us about playing in the Lord’s house. “One of you has the remote and I know it!”

“You mean *that* remote?” Maria says. She points to Miss Valerie’s desk.

Miss Valerie looks at the desk, then back at us. “I’m telling your parents,” she says.

“It’s been there the whole time,” Maria says.

Then Deacon Harris walks by ringing the bell and the class cheers because we realize we have wasted the whole hour. We get up from our seats and head for the door.

“Wait a minute,” Miss Valerie says. “Someone has to share during the wrap-up session.” We all get quiet. We have nothing to share because we didn’t do anything. “Didn’t think about that, did you?” Miss Valerie almost smiles at the fact that now the same kids who just drove her crazy will be in trouble because they have nothing to share with their parents.

Ricky shouts, “Well, if we don’t have anything to share they’ll think you aren’t a good teacher.”

Miss Valerie rolls her eyes and grabs a picture off the wall. “Whose is this?” She shows it to all of us, like kindergarten teachers show picture books as they read.

I raise my hand.

“Good. You are sharing today.”

“What do I— What am I supposed to say?”

“Talk about why you drew this picture. What it means to you, which Bible story inspired it. I don’t know. Say whatever you want.” Miss Valerie hands me the picture and we all leave the class.



During the wrap-up session, when Deacon Harris asks, “Who’s sharing from the middle school class?” I realize that I am nervous and that I really don’t want to do this. And I think how Danny and Ricky and the rest of the class owe me. Miss Valerie too.

I stand at the front of the congregation and say, “I drew this picture after we had a lesson about heaven because it sounds like a place where I want to go.” I hold my picture up and show it to everyone. It’s a picture of heaven—streets paved with gold, silver gates. Grandma looks at it and she is smiling and clapping and everyone joins her. I colored the angels brown, like my momma.