

“Are you there, God? It’s me. Help me break her heart today. And can you bring back the sun?”

But the clouds burst. I breathe in earth and taste mineral tang, wet wind whipping my face. I should’ve known not to come—should’ve stopped when the steeple down the road knifed dark clouds. But she begged, and I couldn’t refuse. Not today.

I fumble with an umbrella before the wind yanks it, tossing it against the monkey bars. I leap from the bench. Bigger kids shriek and race for shelter beneath a sycamore.

Evie doesn’t scream or run. Just waddles to the umbrella, raindrops pearling over her furrowed brow, and points. “Boken.”

She’s right. It lays there, defeated: ribs cracked, shaft bent, rain pounding the blood-red canopy. She frowns, like she never knew skies cry, or that some things don’t mend.

Rain pelts her face as she points to the clouds.

“Dibble dop! Dibble dibble dop!”

She hardly calls things by name, only sound. Same with birds. She says, “tweet tweet,” even though I forget they’re there, sailing through the canopies.

But Evie calls Hattie by name.

“Mama, Hattie?” she asks.

They share everything: germs and gummy bears, giggles and tantrums, a hatred of car horns, and a love for birds, clouds, and wind chimes.

I take her little hand and inhale, a breath that stabs.

“Hattie—” I stop myself. “Not today. It’s raining.”

Evie lifts her hand like she needs proof, even though rain’s already on her cheeks.

“Dibble dop,” she says, matter-of-factly.

We trudge past the creaking iron gate, rain pricking our skin.

“Mama, play Hattie?” she whimpers.

“No,” I say.

We step along slippery sidewalk, past the old red-bricked chapel. Bells chime, marking noon. Church used to be a lighthouse. Now it looks like a funeral home.

We pass a community pool, rain spitting over its glassy face. We breathe chlorine as Evie sticks her hand through the iron bars.

“Mama, pool?”

I squeeze her hand tight. “No. Home.”

“Mama, pool!”

God, help me. I know you’re not a cosmic vending machine that pops out miracles if I push the prayer button hard enough, but I’m pushing hard right now...

A cat with midnight fur and big, olive eyes darts past us.

Evie points. "Meeeeow," she says, slow and serious. The cat leaps over the fence, skids past the pool, and vanishes behind a shed. Evie gasps like she's never seen anything so wild.