

Chapter 1: Daddy Leaves

Hi, my name is Zora Langston, and I am 9 years old. I am from a small town in North Carolina called Goldsboro, where life is slow and the people are good. I live on Beech Street with my parents and my older brother and sister. Today is the worst day of my life and I just need it to be over as quickly as possible. I can't believe my daddy, Barry Langston, left me all alone. He knew my mom hated me and my grandma lives too far away to help. Why would he just abandon me like that? I wanted to go with him, and my heart hurt so much.

I screamed at the top of my lungs, "Daddy! Daddy, come back!" My family was standing at his grave site waiting for the preacher to finish his speech. My mom called it a eulogy, but it seemed like a very long and boring speech from someone who didn't even know my daddy. Daddy always took me to the Church of Christ on Sundays, but this preacher was from the Baptist church my mom attended with my older sister and brother.

"Somebody shut that girl up," my mom said. "She's embarrassing the whole family. Acting so ghetto."

My sister Queenie chimed in, "Doesn't she know that dignified people bury people in silence and with pride? Who ever heard of a child asking her daddy to come back from death?"

It seemed like my brother was lost or numb because he never said a word. This was odd for Big Willie because he always had something to say. He was never without a smooth line or a quick comeback. I guess he was mourning like I was. My mom and sister acted like the only thing they cared about was what everyone would say about their dresses, hair, and make-up. My sister could not wait to be seen in the limo, and I overheard mommy talking to her friends about how nice she was burying my daddy.

"Barry is going to be laid out in the finest suit money can buy" she said. "Oh and that casket, it's the best that they had; mahogany wood with silk lining. He is going out in style, only the best for my husband!"

All of this talk when she knew good and well that daddy would have a fit if he saw the funeral bill. My daddy hated to waste money and he always said, "When I go, just put me in my Sunday suit and a pine box. No need in putting money in the ground. Use it for my baby's education." Of course that fell on deaf ears with Mrs. Teresa Jones Langston! She was always decked out from head to toe. The baddest lady on our block, according to Mr. Samuels at the corner store. He was always telling people how fine my mom was and what kind of designer clothes she was wearing. I swear he was trying to make a move on Mommy, and now that daddy was gone I wonder how long it will take

him to move into our house. Mommy tried to hide it, but she loved the attention he gave her and I saw them holding hands one day. She swore me to secrecy and threatened me within an inch of my life, but I told daddy anyway. He never said a word to her, but I knew it hurt him.

The day my daddy died, I was sitting on the front porch waiting for mommy to unlock the door. I waited for her to pick me up after school, but she never came. Since we walked home the same route every day, I knew my way home. Queenie and Big Willie had afterschool activities and never walked with me. Queenie was a cheerleader and would never be seen with a dork like me. Big Willie was the star of the basketball team, and he was always on the court playing. He would eat and sleep there if Mommy would let him.

My daddy had a heart attack after coming home from work early to let me in the house. A neighbor called him at work to let him know I was sitting outside and couldn't get in. When he arrived I was so happy to see him because I was starving. As we entered the house there were funny noises coming from upstairs. He told me to make myself a snack and he would be right back. When he went upstairs he caught my mommy and Mr. Samuels in the bed together. I was in the kitchen making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when something told me to go upstairs. As I reached the top stair, I heard Daddy yelling and Mommy was crying, "Please, Barry, don't hurt him!" "Hurt him!" Daddy said in a low voice, almost a whisper. His face went pale and he was shaking. The next thing I knew, Mr. Samuels was running past me in his socks with his ding-a-ling swinging everywhere. Then I saw my daddy clutch his chest and fall to the ground. He looked weak as I rushed to his side. He had enough time to say, "I love you, Zora," before my mommy snatched me up and said, "Get your ass downstairs and you better not say a word to anybody about what you saw." As she was pulling me away, I saw his eyes go dead and then his body went limp. Daddy died there on the floor, and that bitch never even called for help. I never really liked my mom, but after that day I hated her! She killed the love of my life and then stole his final moments with her selfishness. I could never forgive her, and if she thought I was going to keep her secret, she had another thought coming. I was just waiting for the right moment to expose her!

As they lowered my daddy into the ground I tried to jump into the hole, but my Grandma Rose stopped me. She locked on to my arm and refused to let me go. I was screaming and crying because I did not want him to go. She just held me in her arms like she always did and attempted to comfort me. My mom could not be bothered. I was making a scene, and she could never be around that sort of behavior. She took my brother and sister and went to the limo. Grandma Rose said, "Now, baby, you can't go with your daddy. I know you love him, but he's not in that box. Daddy is in heaven, and it would make him so very sad to know you were acting like this. I know it hurts, but you must get yourself together, wipe your face, and then come to the limo. OK, baby?"

Grandma Rose always knew how to say the right thing at the right time. I calmed myself down and told her that I was alright. "Thank you Grandma Rose. I just want to say goodbye, and I will be right

there. I promise. I won't try to jump in again."

"Alright, baby. Just hurry up now because you know how your mama is."

"I'll be right there." "OK, I will be in the limo if you need me."

As Grandma Rose walked away, I turned my attention back to my daddy's grave. The men were just about to shovel dirt on top of him when I asked them if I could do it. Something inside of me said "You have to do it. Don't let these strangers put dirt on him." The man handed me the shovel and I put the first bit of dirt on the casket. It made a loud thud, and it stung me. The tears started flowing like a river, but I forced myself to continue. I was working so hard at putting the dirt in that hole that I never even heard my mom come up behind me. By the time I realized what was happening she was slapping me across the face and snatching the shovel out of my hands. When she slapped me dirt got all over her dress which enraged her. "I can't believe your stupid ass is acting like this. You got the whole town looking at me like I raised some type of fool. And you have the nerve to get that cemetery dirt on my new designer dress." She was fuming and talking in a voice just loud enough for me to hear, but no one else. "If you don't get your black ass in this car so we can go home, you are going to need your own grave."

When I got into the limo, Grandma Rose reached out for me, but my mom quickly blocked her. "Old woman, you need to stop babying this girl. She was out of control, and I am not going for her bullshit today." Grandma Rose cleared her throat, but decided this was not the time to argue. She just reached right over my mom, and pulled me with great force onto her lap. She held me tight like she used to do when I was a baby. I put my face on her chest and cried until my tears ran dry. I wanted to cry more, but nothing would come out. Grandma Rose said, "It's ok baby, sometimes God dries up our tears, because he can't bear to see us in so much pain." That made sense to me because the preacher said God loves us and wants the best for us. All I knew was I needed God now more than ever because Grandma Rose was leaving to go back to Virginia in the morning, and Mommy was looking for revenge on me for ruining her dress. I swear she was angrier with me than she was sad about my daddy being dead.

As we walked into our house, I felt a cold chill come over me. I knew I was going to catch hell from Mommy and Queenie. Maybe Big Willie would take pity and take up for me. Yeah right, all he cared about was basketball. I would be on my own as soon as we dropped Grandma Rose off at the bus station. My best bet was to get out of her sight and stay hidden. That way she would not have all the built up anger she usually had for me. Maybe being in a house full of people, and the tasty food from her church friends would put her in a good mood. She sure wasn't mourning! She was good at fronting, though. She would be laughing and running people down, but as soon as someone mentioned Daddy, she acted all sad. "Teresa, I am so sorry for your loss," some lady Mommy knew said. Queue the tears... Mommy could have won one of those awards that the actresses got on TV. She was secretly happy Daddy was dead, but she had to act like she was mourning when people were

around.

I decided to hide in the corner of the kitchen where there was a window seat. It had curtains around it so when I closed them nobody could see me. It was the place that Daddy always sat and read to me from his favorite books. That was one of my best memories of my daddy. He was a lover of books, and read all of the time. In fact, he named me after his favorite writer, Zora Neale Hurston. Every Saturday, when my mom and sister were at the beauty shop, Daddy would grab his favorite book, "Their Eyes Were Watching God" and we would sit in that corner and read. I did not understand everything that he read to me, but I loved the story. Daddy told me that true love was the best gift I could ever give someone, and that is what that book was about. He said Mommy was the love of his life, and no matter what she had done to hurt him, he would always love her. His face always looked dreamy when he talked about my mom. I couldn't figure out why he would love such a witch like her. She was mean and nasty to him, and because I was his sidekick, I felt her wrath, too. Daddy always said, "Your mama was not always like this. She used to be fun and free." She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

As I sat in that nook, hiding behind the curtains, I heard all of the people coming and going. They were like vultures at a buffet. "I wonder if Barry left me anything in his will," one lady said. Some other chick was gossiping about Daddy's life insurance, "I heard he had a million dollar policy." Then I heard something I knew would change my life forever. My Auntie Jen was talking to her friend; she said, "You know he wasn't Queenie and Big Willie's daddy anyway. My sister was playing his ass like a fiddle. She was in it for the money." Her friend said, "Nooo girl, I didn't know that. What about the little girl?" "Oh you talkin' bout Zora," my auntie chimed in. "Child, yeah, he's her father. Just look at her with that dark skin. She is ugly as sin just like her Barry. Why you think Teresa can't stand her ass? She reminds her of Barry so much that Teresa wants to just beat the shit out of her on sight." Both of them walked off laughing.

What did she mean? Queenie and Big Willie were not my daddy's children? Did Daddy know about this? How could that evil woman do this to him? Since she hates me so much, will she kill me now? I want her to kill me so that I can be with my daddy. Before I could finish that thought, I heard two men talking about Mommy and Mr. Samuels. "Man you know he was up in here getting that ass when Barry caught them," said one guy. "Damn, that's just wrong. I would have killed that fucker if it was me." The other man said. "I guess my man Barry's heart gave out before he could get that bastard. You know he's the oldest kids' daddy don't you?" the first man exclaimed. "Everybody's been talking about that since Barry died. That bitch is lucky it wasn't me. I don't care how fine she is, I wouldn't be raising no other man's children, and they still fuckin'!" The first man then said, "Man, let's get out of here, we paid our respects to Barry, but I don't even want to see her. She is a low- down, dirty tramp."

I couldn't believe my ears. Had daddy known that Mr. Samuels was Queenie and Big Willie's daddy?

How could he still love such a horrible woman? True love must hurt more than I realized. Daddy was a saint to put up with such a woman, and still love her after everything she did. Sorry, but I am not a saint, and I will get her back for everything she ever did to my daddy.

As I was lying on the window seat thinking about everything that I overheard, I somehow drifted off to sleep. I woke up to my mom calling my name. "ZORA! Where the hell are you? ZORA!!! I swear I am going to skin you alive when I find you." Since I did not want Mommy to find my special place that I shared with Daddy, I decided to slide down on the floor, and crawl out the back door. Once I was outside, I climbed my favorite tree, and pretended that I was up there the whole time. When Big Willie found me, he teased, "You are in some kind of trouble, girl. Mommy has been looking for you everywhere. She is fire hot. Mommy, I found her!" "Where was she?" screamed Mommy. "She was in the back yard up in the willow tree." "Child, haven't I told you a million times to stay out of that tree? I guess you can't help it since you look just like a monkey. I guess it's in your nature." I felt the rage welling up in me. I was not ugly, and I did not look like a monkey. I usually let her talk to me any kind of way, but not this time. Did she forget that she killed my daddy, and I was there watching her and Mr. Samuels running around naked on that day?

"I am not a member of the primate species and I am not ugly! Just because you're high yellow you think you are better than me, but you are the one who is ugly!"

I thought her head was going to pop off of her neck. Her face turned bright red, and she looked at me with fire in her eyes. She started cursing and screaming at me like I had never seen. She jumped on me, and started wailing on my head. Instead of backing down I started laughing which only fueled her fire. It got so bad that a large crowd grew on the street, and a neighbor had to pull her off of me. Mission Accomplished! I wanted her to lose her cool, act like the street whore she was, and have witnesses from the neighborhood. I would take the beating, lose blood, and deal with a black eye and busted lip if it made her look bad. People were going to be talking about this for days, maybe weeks, and it was not a good look for her. People knew she was pretending to mourn my father, and now she was beating me in front of the entire neighborhood. She fell right into my trap.