



Hotel

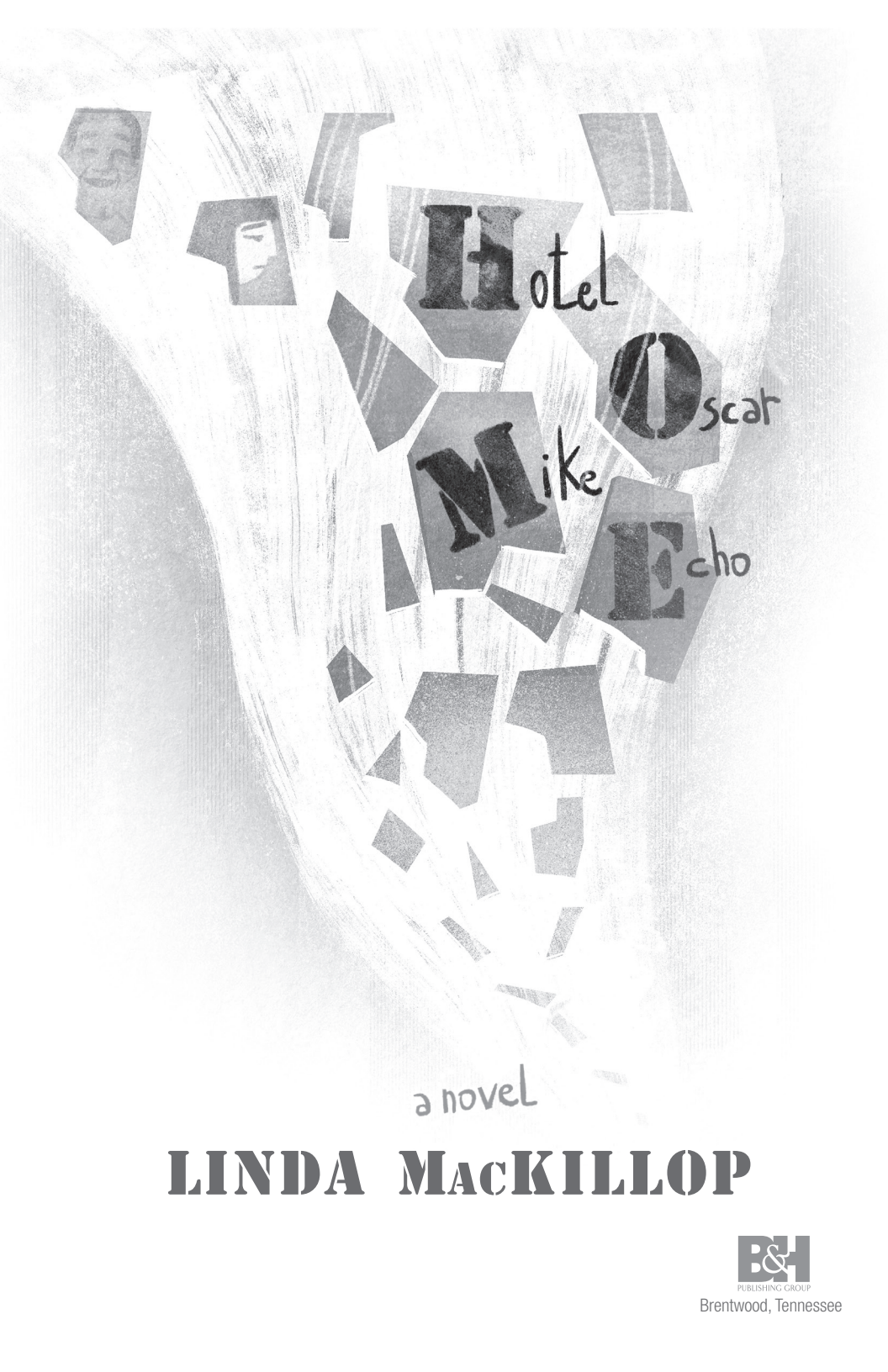
Oscar

Mike

Echo

a novel

LINDA MacKILLOP



Hotel

Scat

Mike

Echo

a novel

LINDA MACKILLOP



Brentwood, Tennessee



DEDICATION

To all the Devons and Sierras
in the world

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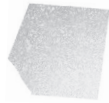
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Charlie Hotel India Lima India

I've never heard a Promise from God before, but a couple years ago, these words came into my head from nowhere, and I thought maybe they were from Him: "Sierra, you're gonna live in a real nice home someday with a stove where all the burners turn on and the bathroom always has hot water. You'll have your own room to decorate any ole way you want, and you won't share any more with your mom or sleep in her car in the empty Food Savers parkin' lot." I'm still holding onto that Promise so tight my fist hurts sometimes, because if I let it go, it won't just be the Promise that disappears. I'll disappear too. A home like that mostly seems impossible, but if we don't believe in miracles, what'll happen to us?

I'm thinking about the Promise while I do my cooking show, *Cooking with Sierra*, on a stove where

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only one burner works. I'm trying not to think about how Mom hasn't come home for two whole nights, leaving me alone. And I'm not talking 'bout the kind of alone where she ran to the grocery store for an hour or to the post office to mail a package to friends still serving in Iraq.

When she came back from the war, I thought we'd never be apart again. I was so wrong.

Standing on a rickety stool so the counter comes up to my stomach, I face the "camera" (meaning the light switch on the white wall by our apartment door). "Thanks for bein' with me tonight, everyone. For this show, we're gonna make a pasta dish that all y'all will love."

I try and sound like Barefoot Contessa or Giada De Laurentiis—two chefs my mom loved to watch when we had cable. I smile at the light switch. I hold up some onions with long brown sprouts growing out of their ends. All the food I could find in our cupboard sits lined up real nice in front of me: a package of pasta, some tomatoes in a dented can, beans in a rusted can, chilies with dust on top of the can, and spices.

In the apartment upstairs, someone starts dribbling a basketball over my head, and I'm afraid my viewers won't be able to hear me. Then a police car zooms down the street with its siren blasting, its lights turning the walls of the apartment red and blue. My face

CHILI

stays frozen in a smile, like I'm not hearing anything but the sizzling hot oil in the pan behind me on that scrubbed clean stove. When I'm worried, I cook *and* clean.

I don't bother telling my viewers how Mom's left me alone again. But I do tell them I'm pausing for a commercial break for a just minute. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back!"

It's getting dark earlier and earlier these days—too dark for my viewers to see me—so I push the switch for the chandelier over the kitchen table, and three out of the six bulbs light up. In the living room, I click on the two small lamps. Then I return to the show. If Mom allowed me to turn up the heat, I'd do that, too, but she likes it to be kept at a nice shivering-cold 65 degrees. "When you pay the bills, Sierra, you can turn up the heat to any ole temp you want."

Back at the counter with the clean kitchen behind me, I say, "The more color in your meals, the better," repeating advice from all the cooking show chefs. They've taught me how to throw weird ingredients together to make dishes that taste pretty good. "More colors mean healthier food that's more pleasurable to the eye. So tonight I'm making *Sierra's Chili*—or as I like to say *Sierra's CHARLIE HOTEL INDIA LIMA INDIA*." My viewers know why I talk this way.

After pulling the skin off the onion and chopping it up real good, I walk back to the stove that looks like

HOME

someone built it in 1958. I'm careful not to trip on the gold floor tiles coming unglued so I don't bump the pan with hot oil and get burned.

"Now I like to get the oil sizzlin' before I add the chopped onion. Then I cook the onion and add the chilies and beans and everything else, stirrin' it up good." The oil splatters a little on my hand when I add the onions and stuff. I run cold water over it for a minute. Mom's never told me not to use the stove when she's not home. She must think eleven's old enough to cook.

After I add all the other ingredients, I hold up the pan for my viewers to see, smiling at the camera. Then I wave my hand over my shoulder to tell them to enjoy the ocean view outside my window so they won't feel bad about the scratched cabinet doors wanting to fall off the hinges behind me. "It sure smells **GOLF OSCAR OSCAR DELTA** in here!"

To make myself feel less sad, I decide to fix up my table tonight to look like the TV chefs'. We don't have a tablecloth, but I take a dish towel with some tomato stains and who-knows-what-else on it and spread it out on the table. Then I put my plate down on top of it, fold a napkin, set it next to the plate, and put down the silverware on top, with the fork on the left and knife on the right.

For a decoration, I use my special container—a mayonnaise jar filled with beach sand, shells, and

CHILI

other things I started collecting when me and Mom visited the sea to help her get better after being in Iraq. She told me on that trip that someday she dreamed of having her very own restaurant and I could work there with her. I pick up the jar and twirl it around to look at my memories there. On that trip, the Promise felt like it would wander up the street at any minute.

I put the salt and pepper shakers on the table next to the jar. Then I sit down in front of my meal, unfold my napkin, and put it on my lap the way my grandma used to do when I lived with her before she got sick. I want to say grace like she always said, but I'm on TV. Instead, I take a bite. Looking straight at the camera, I moan a little before telling my audience they should be here because it's the best thing I've ever tasted. "I wish my friend Chef Giada was here so we could enjoy this yummy recipe together." Mostly, I want her here so Giada could talk real friendly to me while I eat, telling me how happy she is to see me. Before dinner, she might even help me put the food on a platter.

Then I slam the rest of it into my mouth because I'm starving.

If I can't talk to Giada or Mom, I think about calling my dad after dinner and telling him Mom still hasn't come home and I'm scared. We haven't talked in a real long time now that he has that new family. But I know what he'd probably say: "Geez, Sierra. I live hours away from Richmond. How do you want me to fix

HOME

this new mess your mama's made? Besides, I have this new, beautiful wife and her nice, new kids and we're about to have a delicious dinner." I probably would be able to smell a roast cooking over the phone line.

After finishing Sierra's Chili, I look at the numbers on the phone. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe he'd be worried about me and say he's on his way. "Keep the doors locked and don't worry, Sierra!" Maybe he'd even tell me he was sorry for leaving us. Or maybe he'll just sound like someone getting a call from a bill collector rather than his daughter and tell me about his busy life and how he drives so far to work. "You sure this isn't your overactive imagination, Sierra?"

I hit the phone's ON button, and that's when I hear it. Nothing. The landline is dead. I couldn't call him if I wanted to. I bet Mom never paid the bill.

I put the phone back down on the kitchen counter. It'll hurt less if I never hear how he's not interested in me.

I'd call my brother Steven, but no one has his number. He booked it out of town to live far away out West near deserts and cactus, never looking back—my brother who's all grown up and *flown the coop*, as Mom likes to say. When Mom's cell phone worked, he sometimes called.

Outside my door, I hear men talking in the hallway. Someone knocks on the door, then tries my door-knob. I put my finger over my mouth to the audience

CHILI

so they know we have to be real quiet. Finally, they walk away.

Later, when my show is done and I'm washing up my dishes, I hear a man talking with a deep whisper that sounds like a bowling ball rolling down the hall. A key clatters in the lock, and I freeze. My heart thuds so hard my audience probably could've seen my shirt move if I was still doing my show. I duck down behind the counter and hold my breath.



Hotel Oscar Mike Echo Charlie Oscar Mike India November Golf

The door opens and Mom calls my name. I pop up from behind the counter to see her bringing in a man I've never seen before. They're holding hands. I want him to leave **NOVEMBER OSCAR WHISKEY** so I can talk alone with my mother. My fists open and close, and I try to relax my jaw so I don't look like the furious daughter I am. Being mad might make her leave again.

"You're back," I say, my voice as flat as the dishrag tablecloth.

"Hey girl!" Mom tosses her purse on a chair by the table. "Man, it sure smells good in here. Whatcha makin'?" She weaves over to the sink to give me a hug, smelling funny. Her hair looks like it hasn't touched a brush in days, and she's wearing the same black sweater I saw her wearing before she left two days ago.

HOME

The man stays near the door, staring at me with wide-open eyes like he didn't know I was gonna be here. He turns his hand over with his palm facing up, like he's asking Mom a silent question about who this girl is in the apartment.

"Oh, Billy. This is my daughter. Sierra." She tries to act all huggy with me, but I slip away from her and fold the dish towel a special, neat way like Grandma would've.

"Sierra's a real good cook, and it smells like she made us dinner."

"Then hit me with some food, Lori." He comes inside and closes the door, scraping a chair across the linoleum to sit down at the table. He picks up the mayonnaise jar, shaking it back and forth, trying to get a good look at the shells.

I walk over and yank it from his hand before it breaks. He lifts his hand toward me, like he wants to slap me one. Mom's not watching us. What I really wanna do is swing open the door and point the way into the hall for him to leave because I need to talk to my mom
ALPHA LIMA OSCAR NOVEMBER ECHO.

She lifts the top off the chili and waves it toward Billy. "What've we got here, Sierra? Sure smells good."

"Chili," I answer.

"Smell that, Billy? This'll hit the spot!" She's talking like she cooked the meal for him and it was just one of the many dishes piled inside our refrigerator.

HOME COMING

No words come out, and I just fold my hands so tight together in front of my stomach that the blood is probably bunching up and not flowing anymore.

She pulls two bowls out of the dish rack and scoops up some of Sierra's Chili, bringing it over to the table to offer to him. When she sets down the food, she spills a little on Mr. Billy.

"Hey! Watch what you're doin'!" he snaps, brushing the spill onto the floor. Then he doesn't even wait for her to start eating before shoveling the food in his mouth, holding his spoon in a way that says he has no manners. When his bowl's empty he pushes it away. "Got any dessert?" he asks.

I storm off to the bedroom, ignoring Mom's call for me to come back. "I missed you, girl. Come talk to your mama!"

"Homework," I say, closing the door behind me, using all the willpower I can conjure up to close the door without slamming it when I'm feeling furious.

In the room, my bed looks like someone (me) made it in a hurry by throwing up the quilt without straightening any sheets or the blanket underneath. It's not how I normally leave my bed, but I've been in a hurry in the mornings. Mom's bed looks like it was made by someone who once had been in the Army, the way they teach soldiers to tuck the bedspread in so smooth and tight you can't see one wrinkle. Mom's slippers and boots sit lined up neat on the floor beside each

HOME

other near her bed. Her clothes are hung in the one small closet we share, but my clothes are tossed on the end of the bed. My pajamas are crumpled on the floor because I was late for school this morning. I pick them up now and step into them to get ready for bed.

Mom says the military taught her to be neater than she was before she entered the service. She was so proud to be in the Army. But it gave her pain in her leg and all those nightmares after an attack on one of her rescue missions. She never talks about it, but she always seems to be hurting. You can tell by the way she scrunches up her face sometimes and doesn't really walk normal anymore and needs lots of pills to feel okay.

Feeling bad for her makes some of my anger calm down.

After putting on my pajamas and throwing my dirty clothes in the hamper, I kneel beside my bed like my grandma used to do. *Please God, make my mom better. And if that Promise came from You, could You make it come true soon, please?* Then I climb under the blankets and cover myself up tight.



I barely sleep all night. The man leaves right after I go to bed, but I pretend to be asleep when Mom comes in the room and climbs into her own squeaky twin bed. I am too **MIKE ALPHA DELTA** to say anything to

HOME COMING

her. She gets herself all comfortable and doesn't move again for the rest of the night, unlike me who practices speeches in my head that last about eight hours long. Speeches where I tell her what it means to be a mom and how you don't leave your kids alone, and you feed them when they're hungry. And speeches to my dad telling him how you don't replace your children with other children.

The next morning, I take my clothes to the bathroom to get dressed and eat a little of the leftover chili for breakfast. Mom stays asleep while I stuff my books in my backpack.

When you walk to school without any sleep, one mile can feel like a million. Sometimes I walk with my neighbors, Jasmine and Rachel, but today I let them walk on ahead so I can be alone. We've only lived here a few months, so most of the time, I *am* alone.

The day goes by in a blur. I shuffle to art class and work with Jasmine to make a paper-mache mask. She makes a cat, and I make a look-alike of Barefoot Contessa that doesn't look much like her. Then we all get rushed out of the building when someone pulls the fire alarm. Outside, I stand with a couple of girls who talk about other girls, but I don't really care who looks fat in her jeans and who's wearing too much makeup for her age.

Later, I fall asleep on the lunch table until the bell rings. I shuffle to another class and nod like I'm okay

HOME

and shuffle some more. The blur wraps around me like there's only darkness in front of me and behind me with no way to get out of the black foggy life.

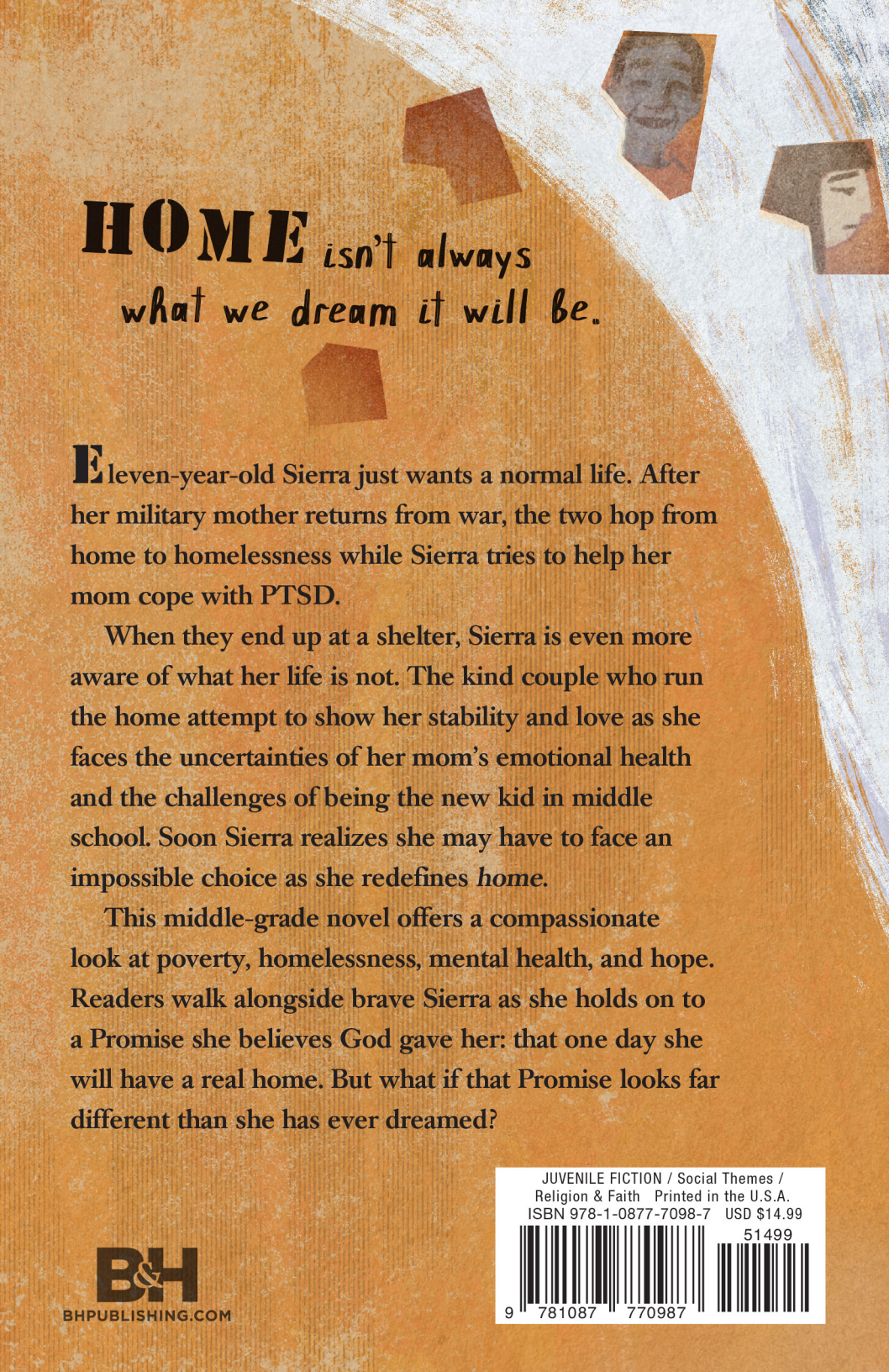
"Sierra, did you do your math homework?" My head snaps up to see Mrs. Rice pointing at the blackboard during fifth period. "Can you show us how to solve this problem?"

Solve a problem? I can't solve any real-life problems, but I can solve math. After jumping out of my seat, I scratch the chalk answer on the board to $83.47 \div 5 = 16.694$, wishing my life could be solved by a division problem.

"Great job, Sierra. Problem-solving is your gift."

I wanna laugh at those words.

At the end of the day when I leave the building to walk home, the real fun begins. Mom is standing in front of her car out in the front of the building, giving me a big ole wave like we should be happy to see each other. I know this can't be good. Usually Mom looks young, even pretty when she cleans up, unlike some of the other kids' moms who look like they're as old as a grandmother with gray hair, tired faces, and worn-out bodies. But today, I would almost swear she's as tired-looking as everyone else. Then I catch a glimpse of our car. All of a sudden, I feel sick to my stomach.



HOME *isn't always what we dream it will be.*

Eleven-year-old Sierra just wants a normal life. After her military mother returns from war, the two hop from home to homelessness while Sierra tries to help her mom cope with PTSD.

When they end up at a shelter, Sierra is even more aware of what her life is not. The kind couple who run the home attempt to show her stability and love as she faces the uncertainties of her mom's emotional health and the challenges of being the new kid in middle school. Soon Sierra realizes she may have to face an impossible choice as she redefines *home*.

This middle-grade novel offers a compassionate look at poverty, homelessness, mental health, and hope. Readers walk alongside brave Sierra as she holds on to a Promise she believes God gave her: that one day she will have a real home. But what if that Promise looks far different than she has ever dreamed?

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