

Girls Like Us

RANDI PINK



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS

NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
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OLA AND IZELLA

**11 Weeks & 6 Days Along
Summer 1972**

Evangelist, Ola, and Izella formed a tight assembly line in their tiny kitchen. Evangelist shelled the peas, sixteen-year-old Ola bagged them into perfect portions, and fifteen-year-old Izella organized them by date in the deep freeze. Izella hated being the youngest. Always stuck with the easiest jobs—organize the vegetables, lay out the spoons, wipe down the table. She wanted to cut, strain, mix, and bake like her big sister, Ola, did from time to time, but Evangelist wouldn't allow it.

“Quit daydreaming, Babygal,” Evangelist snipped as she vigorously stirred shortening into her hot-water cornbread. “You backing us up.”

Izella sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes before picking up the pace. Her mother never let her forget her lowly place in the house; she even called her Babygal as a constant reminder.

“I’m fixing you girls some turkey necks and hot sauce,” announced Evangelist with a wide, drawn smile. “Your favorite since y’all could hold spoons.”

“I can’t,” Ola told her mother with a grimace. “I think I got a bug.”

“You stay sick, gal,” Evangelist told her firstborn, before grasping a piping-hot cauldron from the potbelly stove with her bare hands and placing it in the middle of their small wooden dining table. “Now, everybody down to your knees for grace.”

The three dutifully crouched to their knees in the middle of the spotless kitchen, clasped hands, and closed their eyes for prayer.

Evangelist began. “Oh blessed, kind, loving heavenly Father. Bless this family with the grace of a thousand angels, oh God. Bless this food and the loving hands that prepared it, oh God . . .”

The sisters peeked at each other and giggled. It had

become something of a tradition for them to chuckle during their mother's lengthy prayers. She prayed long, as Ola would say. A food blessing could easily last ten minutes, and by the time it was over, they were starving and their knees ached, but there was no way around it. Their shotgun house was outfitted with oak planked hardwoods. It was small, but it was always clean and filled with strangers, since their tiny living room doubled as a neighborhood church, pastored by Prophetess/Evangelist Flossie Mae Murphy. Everyone from the lowest of the low to the highest of the high was welcome in their small home.

Evangelist had been called to ministry after what she called a young life in the world of sin. Word on the streets said that, before Ola and Izella came along, she had run a successful backyard shot house and bootlegged whiskey and moonshine from Savannah. Even though her mother was a woman of God now, Izella could easily imagine her that way. Evangelist's nature was to bring people in and surround them with joy. When she became a mother, that joy was from the Lord, but as a young woman, she spread that joy through illegal liquor.

"Amen." Evangelist ended her grace. "Now, grab a spoon and fill up before chapel. We've got a full house tonight. That traveling tent revival out of Detroit went up last night. They stop by every year for southern home

cooking. Last year was standing room only; remember that, Ola? Babygal was probably too little to remember.”

Izella cringed until Ola caught eyes with her and mouthed the word *help*.

“Evangelist?” Izella asked her mother.

“What is it, Babygal?” she replied.

“I forgot to take Mrs. Mac her bread this morning,” Izella said with her head hung. “You mind if we miss supper today to walk down to her house?”

Evangelist stopped her stirring to stare at her daughters. “Look here now, girls. I know Mrs. Mac is mean as a snake, but she’s been through hell and came out the other side scarred up. It’s a wonder she’s still walking this side of heaven with all she’s been through. I’m not trying to punish y’all. I’m teaching something that can’t be taught in school or even at church.” Evangelist poked her index finger into Izella’s sternum. “Life ain’t got a thing to do with what you want. You were put on this earth to help people who can’t help themselves. Feed people who can’t feed themselves. Even wipe people up when they can’t do it, you understand me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Izella.

“You too?” she asked Ola. “You’re the oldest.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ola replied. “I understand.”

“Now,” she said before going back to stirring. “Go on

ahead and take that poor woman what might be her only meal today.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they said, and scurried out the back door.

“Back before the streetlights!” Evangelist yelled after them.

Ola and Izella quickly walked to the first intersection and turned the corner.

“Thanks,” Ola told her sister. “I couldn’t stomach one spoonful of turkey-neck juice.”

“You’re welcome, but you owe me,” Izella replied. “I actually wanted them turkey necks. Where we going?” Izella skipped after her big sister.

“Where else?” Ola pointed to the recreation center where her secret boyfriend, Walter, worked.

Izella stopped walking. “Ola, I didn’t skip supper to watch you and that boy all hugged up again. Besides, I really do need to take Mrs. Mac her loaf of bread. She crippled and can’t walk no more.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Ola started. “You head on over to mean old Mrs. Mac’s house, and I’ll go hug up with Walter, that way you won’t have to see us.”

Izella turned back toward home. “I’m telling Evangelist on you.”

“Okay, okay, okay.” Ola gave in. “I’ll go with you to

Mrs. Mac's house, but don't get all into a talk for hours and hours like you do. I don't know why you want me there; she just ignores me. You and Evangelist are the only two folks she likes in the world."

"I'd ignore you, too, if you called me mean old Mrs. Mac," Izella replied. "You don't even try with her. Ask her a question about her life every now and then."

"That's just it. I don't care," Ola said before tugging at one of Izella's fuzzy pigtailed.

"Exactly. You're a low-down dirty gal."

Ola stopped cold and folded her arms tightly. "I'm not low-down; I'm just not interested in those old, sad slave stories all the time."

"She hasn't told me one sad slave story, thank you very much."

"Then what y'all talk about in that back room, then?"

"You really don't know?" Izella asked, stunned. When Ola shook her head, she continued, voice hushed. "Mrs. Mac was a reader back in the late eighteens, hiding out in the weeping woods of Savannah. She tells me stories, real stories about curses and hexes and love spells and protections. She can even read my hand and tell what I'm gone be when I get big."

"You lying," Ola said with a phony confidence. She could hardly believe that after months of daily visits to

Mrs. Mac's she had no idea about any of this. "That's a bunch of baloney. What she tell you?"

Izella could tell that Ola was trying to act like she didn't care. "None of your business! You don't even like Mrs. Mac, re-mem-ber?" Izella skipped forward with bigger strides.

"Wait." Ola followed. "You think she can tell me how many babies me and Walter gonna have? Or if we'll have a house with a yard or a fence or a pecan tree?"

"Nope."

"Why?" Ola asked angrily. "I've been bringing her old tail bread every day. She owes me a telling."

"She ain't no fool, Ola. She knows you ain't no friend of hers, and she don't read folks she don't like." Ola tugged at Izella's pigtail again. "Ouch!"

"Make her like me, then."

Izella stopped in front of Mrs. Mac's paint-peeled front fence, pulled the fresh loaf from her satchel, and handed it to her older sister. "Here," she told her before slowly opening the fence. "Do it yourself."

Holding the bread like a newborn baby, Ola slowly walked across the overgrown yard, avoiding busy ant beds and uneven concrete slabs pushed up by unkept tree roots. She'd taken this walk a hundred times before, but now she walked with a new purpose. Her very future depended

upon what that old bat told her, and she was about to find out no matter what.

When they reached the rickety front screen, she looked back at her little sister to find her at her heels for support. Though she was younger, Izella was always wiser and more mature than Ola. No one dared speak it, but it was an obvious fact of their sisterhood—the eldest leaned heavily on the youngest.

Sensing Ola's nervousness, Izella called out to Mrs. Mac. "Yooo-hooooo," she hollered before knocking on the screen, which was hanging on by a single hinge.

"Come on in, young'un." A small but significant voice echoed from the heart of the shotgun house.

The sisters snaked their way through the cluttered home. Ola nearly tripped over the sail of a hand-carved wooden ship that was the size of a shoebox. The wood scraped her bare calf, leaving a bloody splinter behind.

"Damn it!" Ola yelled out as blood dripped on wrinkled clothing that was sprawled on the floor. "What the hell was that?"

Ola lifted the bloodstained ship and immediately regretted it. Upon closer inspection, it was no ordinary ship; it was filled with blank-faced enslaved people. She didn't want to see, but she had to look. The tiny details

of the carving must've been labored over with the smallest of instruments. A slit-skinny mother held an even thinner baby in her arms; a muscular man crouched with slouched shoulders; a child stood tall and alone. It was a work of horrific art. So beautiful that Ola wanted to cry.

"Put my shit down, gal!" Mrs. Mac's voice broke the spell of the moment.

"How did she know?"

"She's a seer, too," Izella whispered in response. "Blind, broken folks can see better than the rest of us sometimes." Izella eased the ship from her older sister's hand and gently placed it on the cluttered table. "Come on. And don't touch anything."

The sisters headed to the smoke-filled back room, where the distinct smell of marijuana and unfiltered cigarettes was thick and stout. Izella confidently entered the bedroom first and took a seat at the foot of Mrs. Mac's ash-smeared bed.

"You've got worry all over you," Mrs. Mac said in a kind, genuine voice. "What's wrong, child?"

"It ain't me, Mrs. Mac," Izella replied with a small smile. Then she motioned toward the bedroom door, where Ola stood, sneakily plugging her nostrils. "Come on in, Ola. You know Mrs. Mac."

Ola watched her step as she entered the room. Every small stride took strategic avoidance of black ashes, spent tea bags, and little white granules of salt or sand.

“Oh, just walk straight, *you*,” Mrs. Mac spat with impatience. Her use of *you* (sounding more like *yew*) as a nickname cut deeper than a cuss—it was a disgusted *you*, a repulsed *you*, a *you* that you’d never want to be called, and both sisters knew it.

“I’m s-sorry,” Ola stuttered. “I was just trying to . . . uh. I didn’t want to mess up your . . . uh. It’s a lot of stuff on your . . . uh.”

Izella put her head in her hands as her sister floundered.

“I can’t stand folks who don’t tell it like they think it. You didn’t want to dirty your pretty Mary Janes on this old woman’s filthy floor. You as see-through as a crystal siren bell, *you*.”

There it was again, that *you*.

“What you want?” Mrs. Mac asked in a repulsed hock. “Spit it.”

Ola looked to Izella for help, but Izella was wise enough to keep out of it. Mrs. Mac wasn’t the type to be manipulated by youth. She wanted it straight or not at all. Instead of speaking, Izella nodded Ola along like a jockey would a skittish horse.

Ola spoke in a soft voice. “I, ma’am, was hoping to get a read.”

Mrs. Mac laughed in a cackle. “You don’t need a reader to read you. You one of them gals with boys in your head and not much else. They just want a piece of your new body, and then they want to throw it in the trash. But ain’t no point in telling you. You’ll know it when it ain’t no time left to change it. You won’t know you in the trash until the garbageman coming, and then it’s too late.”

Mrs. Mac paused her contempt to suck a lengthy drag from her cigarette and open her crust-filled eyes, which had been closed the entire time. In her pause, Ola took in the look of the lady. She was half-covered in a dingy bedspread that Evangelist had knitted her a year ago. Her hair looked like it had been cut by a blind person—it probably was, since Mrs. Mac was legally blind. Her skin was layered wrinkles, like a chocolate cake melting in the hot sun, each layer stacking on the one underneath. The whites of her eyes were bloodshot, maybe from the marijuana, and both pupils blue-grayed over like marbles. She was a thrown-away woman. A human being that Ola couldn’t imagine living a life worthy of living.

“I hear your judgments in your pretty little head,” Mrs. Mac said. “They louder than your words.”

Ola knew the old woman had her dead to rights. She had little patience for old women wasting away from hard memories. She hadn't told a soul about it, not even Izella. Ola stood as still as possible. She weighed her next move. She could cut tail and run before the woman had another chance to demean her or read her thoughts. Or she could stand her ground; after all, Mrs. Mac was just a half-blind old woman. What could she possibly do to her? Ola decided on a third option—denial.

“I wasn't thinking anything of the sort, ma'am,” she lied. “You have a lovely home, and I'd like very much to hand you your bread so you can enjoy it. Best bread in town, ma'am.” Ola placed the loaf on the woman's side table.

Izella again placed her head in her hands and shook it, which Ola took as a bad sign.

“Come here, *you*.” Mrs. Mac lifted her unsteady hand. Her hand reminded Ola of the screen door hanging on its hinges. “I'll read you.”

Ola walked forward, intentionally ignoring the mess at her feet. She wanted to be read. She wanted to know if her and Walter's picket fence would be white or red. She wanted to find out, once and for all, how many kids they'd have. She wanted to look into her beautiful future and know. She needed to know.

Ola looked at the old woman and smiled; she'd won. She was about to get read.

Mrs. Mac grabbed her hand tighter than Ola thought possible. She cried out in pain, but the old woman wouldn't let go. The pain changed. It started as a simple squeeze, like when the nurse is taking blood pressure, and it turned into a heat like embers. Her hand burned so badly Ola felt tears streaming from the side of her eye. Just as quickly as she'd snatched her hand, the woman let go. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds, but it felt like an hour.

Mrs. Mac stared wide-eyed at the front of Ola's neck. She squinted her blind eyes as if she was focusing in on a small bit of something near Ola's Adam's apple. "Lean in closer," she said.

Ola leaned in a bit.

"Closer than that, *you*."

She leaned in closer still.

Squinting at Ola's neck, Mrs. Mac whispered, almost pitying, "You've got a heartbeat in your neck, gal."

Izella leaped from her seated position and grasped her mouth in horror. But Ola had no idea what that meant. She grabbed her neck, thinking she'd been snake-bitten or rubbed too much into some poison oak. From the look on Izella's face, it had to be bad. "What is it? What does that mean? What's on me?"

“It ain’t what’s on you,” said Mrs. Mac. “It’s what’s in you. That garbageman already coming for you, child.”

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Three days after Mrs. Mac dropped her bomb, Ola and Izella were still reeling from the news. Ola was in complete denial, watching her panties day and night, trusting the blood to magically appear. Izella, however, believed the prophecy beyond a shadow of a doubt. She’d seen Mrs. Mac work, and she knew she was the real deal. Mrs. Mac knew things she shouldn’t have been able to know. Like how the boys were going to come back from the war twisted in the head. Or how bell-bottoms were going to take over. Hell, she even told Izella that old fuddy-duddy Nixon was gone win the presidency. She also said he’d tuck his tail before his time was up, which turned out to be a whopper, but everybody’s wrong sometimes.

Ola was just deciding to go on about her business, with the exception of the hunger strike. Aside from handfuls of aspirin, Ola hadn’t eaten a bite since that fateful afternoon, Izella noticed. Ola continued on pressing and folding her bobby socks, hot combing her hair into her favorite Dorothy Dandridge pin curls, and visiting Walter at the rec center like there was nothing growing in her belly. The only evidence of her predicament was the raw

egg yolks she kept throwing up. They slept head to foot in the same twin bed, and Izella had a front-row seat to the breaking down of her sister's facade during vomit sessions.

After the last visitor left Bible study, or prayer, or supper, or service, Ola curled her knees into her chest, vomited, and moaned. Low, guttural sounds would come from the depths of her diaphragm. Real pain existed there. Not only the pain of pregnancy, but the pain of denying it. That type of denial took work.

Izella would ease the bobby socks from her sister's feet and massage them until she cried more. Izella knew not to speak or inquire about feelings. That wasn't the Murphy way of doing things; love was a verb in that house. But Izella also knew that Ola needed to cry, and an unprovoked foot rub always did the trick. That night, she noticed the skin of her sister's feet was holding extra fluid. Her pinkie toe looked like a tiny Vienna sausage.

Through her crying, Ola winced at the foot rub.

"Don't squeeze too much." Ola pushed the words through her teeth like they weighed a thousand pounds each. "Can't . . . get . . . no . . . relief."

She didn't have to say it. Izella could look at her usually breezy older sister and see the pain. Izella felt it, too. When Ola moaned, Izella's stomach did a flip. When the tears fell from Ola's almond-shaped eyes, Izella's nose

began running. When Ola hurt, Izella did, too. While gently pressing tiny circles into her sister's feet, Izella closed her eyes to silently pray. She started the prayer in her head. It was a prayer that Evangelist would've been proud of, channeling the Holy Spirit with full force and zeal. But the prayer evaporated halfway through, never reaching its amen.

Eyes closed in their small dark bedroom, Izella saw her sister as she had been. Every button fastened, even the one at the very tip-top. No stray hair or lint or wrinkles in her gloves. A sure bet for homecoming queen of the class of 1972. Her head was practically made to wear a crown. And then there was Walter. The blood ran hot in Izella's body when she thought of Walter.

A gentle snore vibrated from Ola so Izella eased her own pillow under her sister's feet, leaving her without one to lie on herself. She fell asleep with her head in her hands.

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The next morning, Izella woke to an unfamiliar sound—throaty and deep with occasional high-pitched tones like a cat with a hair ball stuck. Izella was floating somewhere between being awake and asleep. She couldn't tell if the sounds were happening in real life or in her head. She was angry at the sun shining onto her face so bright that through

closed eyes her lids glowed red. She was also angry at her dream, which she couldn't fully remember, but she knew it was about Walter. The sound grew and grew until she couldn't deny that it was real and opened her eyes.

Ola crawled across their bedroom's hardwood floor, the bib of her nightgown covered in the egg-yolk throw up and pee running down her leg. The sound was the sister she loved more than she loved herself. Still, Izella didn't jump to help her. She just watched, frozen.

She watched her sister's crushed pin curls coming undone and crusting with vomit. She watched the remnant drool on the right side of her face. But mostly, she watched the slow creep of her sister's urine. In that moment, Izella knew she'd never be able to forget what she was seeing. She imagined herself, old and gray, waking in the night to see her sister crawling like a kicked stray bitch, making noises she didn't know existed within the human body.

Ola reached for her, hand sticky and foul, but Izella hesitated to take it. Ola noticed the small but significant moment of pause, and it was as if the string that had been holding her up on all fours snapped. Ola fell into a pitiful heap. The string had also held together the two sisters, and in that very moment, they both knew it was severed forever.

That's when Izella leaped from the bed to her sister's side. She'd scrutinize that hesitation for decades, if she lived to see it. Why hadn't she acted quicker? How could she allow her sister to crawl in her own vomit without helping her? And even worse, how could she let her sister see the judgment in her eyes? She'd almost convinced herself that she didn't know the source of that hesitation, but deep down, she knew that it was Ola's weakness she hated. The vomit and pee didn't bother her, not one bit. Most people might find those things disgusting, but to Izella, the defeat was disgusting. Izella made up her mind that she'd never allow herself to fall so far so fast. Not for a boy or a man or a woman or anybody, not ever. If sweet Moses himself set out his staff to lead her out of Egypt, she'd dig a way out her own damn self. No one deserved the power to take down a powerful girl or woman like her sister, she decided. Especially not one as batty as Walter.

"Is it supposed to be like this for every girl?" Izella asked.

Ola didn't answer. She didn't even lift her eyes from the floor. An abject shame clothed her from head to feet.

Izella raked her pin curls loose. "Can you make it to the wash?"

Again, Ola didn't lift her eyes.

"Sister?" Izella asked, beginning to feel the butterflies. "Do I need to get a doctor called?"

Ola forced herself into a sitting position. “Walter,” she said. “Get Walter.”

Izella felt her nostrils flare, and her blood began to run hot and fast. “I can’t stand Walter. He did this to you, and I ain’t doing it.”

Ola didn’t show any emotion at the grandstanding. She simply whispered, “Well I guess I ain’t got nobody, then.”

Ola and Izella locked eyes as they’d done a thousand times before. Sister to sister. Best friend to best friend. But everything had changed. Loyalties had shifted. Ola’s to Walter and Izella’s to her single-minded fight for her own future—one she swore wouldn’t involve egg-yolk vomit.

“Gals.” Evangelist knocked on their bedroom door. “Time for devotion. Come on here.”

Izella answered. “We’re finishing up cleaning, and fixing up the bed. Be out before you get started.”

“Ten minutes and I’m coming back.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Izella called out, then turned her attention back to her sister. “All right, now you don’t worry about this mess. I’ll mop it up while you wash that yellow out your hair. And stand up straight or Evangelist will know.”

Ola looked at her like a doe would its mama. “What about Walter?”

“You need to be worrying about Evangelist first,” Izella said. “Go in there and wash your teeth, too.”

Izella lifted Ola to the edge of the bed and propped her like a toddler just learning to sit up. She tiptoed across the hall to get a towel big enough to sop up the yellow and wet another, smaller one to clear the crust from her sister’s face. Ola sat there and let Izella wipe her off like a child.

“I need Walter.”

“Fine.” Izella relented. “I’ll get him after devotional. Go get you on some clean panties, now.”

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Devotional was quicker than usual. Ironically enough, Evangelist needed to get across town to feed another expecting teenager, named Mississippi, or Mississippi for short. Evangelist had found out about Mississippi from a mealymouthed church member.

Evangelist was warm toward the baby. She called it “God’s” and “little” and “precious” and “innocent.” She was, however, much less generous to Mississippi, who she unaffectionately referred to as “that ole nasty thang” and “she should’ve known better” and “was raised better than that.”

Izella and Ola always only listened. Even though

Evangelist was technically talking to them, any discussion of sex or pregnancy felt like grown-folks' business that they weren't welcome to comment on. Evangelist had no close friends who weren't parishioners, so the sisters were a dumping ground for her personal woes and angry rants. At times, Evangelist lamented about never having any sisters of her own to talk to and confide in about things. She never missed an opportunity to tell them how blessed they were to have each other, and how so very disappointed she was in her own mother for not providing her at least one sibling.

Izella thought about this often. Analyzed it. Turned it over in her mind, and every day she'd come up with something different. One day, Evangelist had it right and having a sibling was a blessing—instant friendship, someone to talk to, and someone to help warm her freezing bed in the winter. And then on the next day, Izella decided she'd rather be alone in a cold bed than witness her sister's knees knocked out away from underneath her. She usually reached the same conclusion—there would be pros and cons either way, and in the end, everybody wants the thing they don't have, even if they're blessed not to have it.

“Ola, what's the matter with you, child?” Evangelist asked after an especially brutal lashing of Mississippi. “You look like hell walking earth.”

“You talking about that poor girl all the time,” Ola said into her untouched eggs and biscuits. “Girl can’t defend herself.”

Raw rage filled the kitchen. “What you dare say, gal?” Evangelist said, spitting a mouthful of gravy-soggy biscuit into the air.

Izella jumped to her feet, grabbing hold of the attention. “We need to take Mrs. Mac her loaf. Can we be excused, Evangelist?”

Evangelist gathered the dishes. “I need to get them cheese grits to that hussy Mississippi or they’ll get all lumped up in the icebox. Poor innocent living in that gal’s belly won’t take nothing but my cheese grits. Y’all get on to Mrs. Mac’s and be back to cook for afternoon prayer.” Evangelist paused to glare at Ola, who was still eyeballing her plate. “We’re expecting six today. All men, too. They stopping in to be prayed over and eat a good meal on the way over to Tuskegee. Special place in hell for what they did to those men up there. Ola?”

“Yes, Evangelist?” Ola said, trying to insert bass into the two words to make them sound normal, but to Izella, they still sounded sick and abnormal.

“Look at me when I speak to you.”

Ola winced, forcing her back straight.

“God don’t like ugly one bit, gal,” Evangelist said sternly and full of woman-of-the-house wisdom. “Honor your mama. Honor your pastor. And above all things, child, honor Him.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ola said dutifully.

“I make up two of those three, you hear?” Evangelist grabbed Ola’s chin with such force that she nearly fell back in her chair. “If you test me like that again. In my own goddamn house. I swear I’ll smack you. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jumbo tears fell from Ola’s giant eyes. “I understand.”

Only then Evangelist released Ola’s face and went to wash dishes.

“You’re both dismissed,” she said. “And Ola! Only the big chicken pieces today for them poor men. Leg quarters, whole breasts. Leave the wings for us, you hear?”

“Yes, Evangelist,” Ola said, drained and void of strength.

Evangelist scooped up the container of grits and waved a quick goodbye before stopping herself. She turned around slowly, sending fear through both Izella and Ola. She knew. She’d noticed something. Put two and two together. Now that Izella knew the truth, the signs were so obvious she’d be shocked if Evangelist

hadn't figured it out, too. Besides, she'd spent a half hour howling about Mississippi's condition, and if she'd just replaced her name with her own daughter's, there you'd have it.

Evangelist's eyes doubled, and she said, "Ola."

"Yes, Evangelist?"

Both sisters were sure. The question was imminent. Three little words: *Are you pregnant?* But instead, she said . . .

"Only the biggest pieces, gal. I mean it. These men have been to hell and back, and their families, too. The least we can do is feed them the best we got."

"Yes, Evangelist."

And as Evangelist left, a breeze of both relief and disappointment blew through the small kitchen. Relief was obvious. Of course they didn't want their mother, the prophetess/evangelist of the neighborhood, to know that ultimate sin slept in the next room. Disappointment, however, was a surprise. They almost wanted her to know. They wanted her to scream and cry and even slap as long as she needed to until she was done, so she could tell them what to do. She was, after all, everyone's adviser. The sisters felt like two baby ducks lost in a mangrove—directionless, knock-kneed, and ripe for picking. The lon-

ger Evangelist didn't know, the longer they didn't know what to do. Especially Ola.

Even before the pregnancy, Ola could hardly tie a bow without Izella to pull at one of the strings. Now she was a useless waste of space. The best she could do was build a human inside her body; the rest was up to her little sister, Izella. And whether she judged her or not, they both knew it.

Izella gently placed the back of her hand on her older sister's forehead. "Hot. You gone on back in that bed. I'll get Mrs. Mac her bread and send Walter, too."

Ola perked up as much as a sickling could. "You mind telling him?"

Any other sister might have been surprised, but Izella knew Ola would need her to tell the child's father that he was about to be a father, because she knew her sister. Dread filled up inside her, and the weight sent her into a hunch that a fifteen-year-old girl should never have. "I'll tell him," she said.

As Izella walked out the screen door, she began practicing her speech to the boy she hated. The boy with the shaky hands. The boy who disappeared for months and came back smelling like unwashed hair. The boy who used to be popular and fine, and now parted hallways.

The boy who Izella used to love more than life, and now feared. The boy who got her sister pregnant. The boy who left Georgia wearing cuffed jeans and came back from Vietnam wearing dirty everything.

The boy by the name of Walter.

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Izella walked into the recreation center where Walter worked at the basketball check-in. She held back and watched for a few moments. There he stood, in army fatigues, filling and organizing basketballs into perfect lines. He cared too much about the meticulousness of those basketballs. Izella inched toward him like a jungle cat, intuitively cautious not to make any sudden movements.

After he'd returned from the war, no one except Ola wanted to speak to Walter. When Izella, Ola, and Walter were little, he was puffed up like a peacock. But when he came back, he was as deflated as a kicked mutt.

Walter was the first boy Izella knew to drink from the white fountain in front of the white folks. He'd done it on a dare. None of the other children thought he would, but he did. Those white folks called him everything but a child of God that day, but he did it and puffed right along with his chest out. Then all of the other boys formed a line and took a drink to see if the water tasted better.

Even before that, everybody followed Walter's lead. He was a natural at leading, and that's why no one was shocked when he volunteered to go to war at only seventeen. His mama signed his papers one day, and his seat was empty for the next ten months. While he was away, stories about his valor circulated around.

"Walter's taking out that whole fleet by hisself."

"I heard Walter shoot straighter than anybody over there."

"You know Walter gone get that special medal, being brave as he is."

"I think I'll volunteer, too."

Those were the stories. Then when he came home, smelling and shook, nobody was talking about volunteering anymore. Once, in the full lunchroom, he hit the floor at the sound of a freshman girl dropping her tray. It took a call to the principal to get him up. After that, he sat alone. It was as if he wasn't Walter at all anymore. Everybody was scared of or repelled by him. Everyone, that is, except Ola, who seemed to love him more broken than fixed.

"Walter?" Izella asked to see if he was still inside his body or elsewhere.

"You been watching me," he replied, wide-eyed. "Ola okay?" He looked older than he was, but young, too.

Young enough to believe in ghosts and old enough to have actually seen them.

“Not too okay,” Izella said, not sure how to tell him his girl was pregnant.

He jumped away from his basketball keep, accidentally leaving the latch undone. Dozens of freshly pumped basketballs fell onto the court. Walter cringed at every bounce, and he almost took off running but stopped himself.

“What’s wrong with my girl?” he asked frantically. “I can’t lose . . . Where is she now?”

“She at home,” she said, pitying. She and her schoolmates were terrified of what had become of Walter in Vietnam. He was proof that the boogeyman existed, and they’d rejected him for it. But not Ola. In that moment, Izella realized that her sister, with all of her naivete, saw Walter deeper than she had. She also realized that he loved Ola more than life itself. “She’s going to have a baby, Walter.”

Walter sunk into himself.

“Walter?” Izella said, but his eyes were blank. “You all right?”

“I’ll . . .” he started. “I ain’t right, though. I can’t take care of no baby. I ain’t right.” He locked eyes with Izella. “Tell me what to do.”

He grabbed her shoulders too tightly and shook, as if attempting to release the answers from her tiny frame. Pain shot through Izella's upper body. He was strong, wild, almost rabid. Izella decided to take it—the pain, the fear, the haphazardness of the basketballs, and Walter and Ola, all of it.

Izella. The youngest of Evangelist's girls. Fifteen years old. Hadn't even gotten her period yet was again being asked to solve the problems of her elders. Everyone thought her capable, even Evangelist. Even though she wouldn't let her cut the vegetables, she occasionally asked her for advice about her parishioners. She'd never once asked Ola.

The truth was Izella didn't know what to do. Ola was expecting, Walter lost his mind in the jungle somewhere, and Evangelist was too busy saving the world one meal at a time to notice any of it. There was no one to turn to except Izella. She had to step up. She had to be the strong one. Her stomach was turning from the pressure, but she had no choice. She was the only one left with good sense. She stood there, firm in Walter's uncontrolled grasp, equally flattered and petrified. She forced her chin up.

"You go to my house and sit with Ola," Izella told Walter with the authority of a parent. "She's probably sick at her stomach, needing somebody to clean her up and rub her back. I'll figure out what to do about the other."

“What are you going to do?” Walter asked, eyes still wild.

“Just go on now.”

Walter dutifully went on, dodging basketballs like land mines. As he turned the corner, leaving the gymnasium, Izella let herself shrink into a fifteen-year-old. While speaking to Walter, she'd been projecting herself into something older. More mature. Something with a full life of wisdom behind her. But when there was just her left, standing in the middle of the basketball court, surrounded by loose balls, she broke. No crying, never that. Izella broke in Izella's way—the thinking way. She allowed her thoughts to disorganize and jumble into one another. She shook her head as they made the rounds through her mind like shooting stars.

Ola's pregnant. Oh God. Evangelist will send her away. Would she really send her away? Of course she would. She called Mississippi a hussy all day long and turned her nose up to her. Sent away was probably the best thing for that child. Ola can birth it, come back, and put on her bobby socks like nothing had happened. But Izella knew that wasn't her sister. Ola would want that baby. So, what if Evangelist let her raise it? She'd have to marry. Make the thing legal in front of God and the congregation. Ola, a wife. To Walter. Poor Walter. Shook Walter. Walter can't

hardly take care of his own self. The old Walter would've raised a good baby. A strong baby with a straight backbone for what's what, but this new Walter needed quiet. New babies don't know quiet. Even he knows he ain't right no more.

A baby can't be brought into a world as messed up as this one here, Izella thought. She hadn't known many babies in her lifetime. Hadn't even changed a diaper that she could recall, but she knew that a baby would suffer being brought up by Ola. She was too young and dumb to be a mama. Ola dreamed in the daytime about pretty dresses and hair bows. She still avoided the cracks in the sidewalk for the chance it might break Evangelist's back—she wouldn't admit to it, but Izella knew it. What kind of mother could she make? A mama that drops a baby on its head, that's what kind.

Izella shook her thoughts away again, trying to reorganize herself into the sister with the right answer. Best thing for everybody is no baby. No baby for Evangelist to know about, no baby to send Walter into the shakes, no baby to split Ola from a girl into a mama. No baby. But how could a growing baby in a belly turn into no baby in a belly?

Izella lifted the loaf of bread from her deep pocket. Mrs. Mac. She'll know what to do. She fled the gym and nearly squeezed the loaf into a thousand crumbs.

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On her way to Mrs. Mac's house, Izella tidied up her mind. The answer was clear and obvious—baby needed to become no baby.

When Izella turned onto Mrs. Mac's block, she saw her sitting on her porch swing. The creaking sound echoed through the neighborhood. The high squeak gave Izella pause and stopped her in her tracks. Slow, lengthy whines emitted from the rickety chains that were barely holding Mrs. Mac's small body. They were louder than they should've been, and they packed more of a punch. The sound of a porch swing was a typical thing in her neighborhood, a welcome thing. It usually reminded Izella of fresh-squeezed lemonade with ice and seeds floating inside, but this felt like warning sirens going off.

Izella slowly opened the gate to Mrs. Mac's yard and closed it behind her. "How did you manage to get outside, Mrs. Mac?"

Mrs. Mac looked like a different woman than she had the day before. Hair combed, teeth washed, and day dress clean, she looked healthy and strong for her age. Izella noticed a new glow in her red-boned skin. She looked like she'd greased herself with one of the butters—shea or cocoa.

“I ain’t felt this good in a minute, child,” Mrs. Mac said with a tinge of chipper. “Where your sister?”

Mrs. Mac had all ten of her fingers clasped together into a pulsing bulge. She was giddy with the knowing, and her anticipation was as thick as fresh-cut bacon. Izella felt herself standing at a fork in her life. One way was right, and one wasn’t, but neither were ideal, and she couldn’t decide which was which. Izella should’ve dropped the crumpled bread at Mrs. Mac’s feet and run off. She should’ve made something up—another well visit, or a grocery store necessity, or something. But she didn’t.

“We need this baby gone, Mrs. Mac,” Izella said, forcing every word out of her mouth individually, pretending they didn’t make up the single most important sentence she’d ever said in her life. “Can you help us get rid of it?”

Mrs. Mac’s skin shone even more alive. “Last night,” she said with a wide smile, revealing very old teeth, “I dreamed you was coming here to ask me that there question, child. When a knowing woman dreams something like that, it means death is a long way off. It means death is gone let me see this whole thing play out till the ending of it. I got a lot of life ahead of me, child, thanks to you and your sister. You two keeping me on this side a little while longer, and for that reason, I’m gone help you get rid of that old baby.”

Izella exhaled a sigh of resolution. She hated unfinished things. Izella was the type to sit for hours lifting stuck gum off the walkway. The type to read an awful book all the way until the end. Right or wrong, Mrs. Mac had given her an ending, and that fact had let a little anxious air out of her.

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Izella ran home feeling a little lighter. She turned left on Westcliff, just like every other day. She found herself avoiding the cracks, just like Ola. She'd never done that before. Not once. In an instant, she decided to cut through Mrs. Stoke's pecan-shell-littered backyard and jump Mr. Turner's fence, careful to avoid kicking over his fermenting white-lightning jugs near the back shed.

Izella never used the shortcut when she and Ola walked home together. Ola was edgy as a shot cat about people. Always avoiding the off chance that she might run into another soul as much as possible. A popular recluse, Ola relied heavily on her beauty. Outside their small bedroom, she showed little of her personality, not even to Evangelist. Lively and easy with Izella, but buttoned up and stuffy with most everybody else. The only other somebody Ola could be free with was Walter.

And there he was, pacing rings around her backyard.

Shaking his head back and forth and up and down and back and forth and up and up and up and screaming at the clear blue sky with a long, drawn-out “Whyyy?” Meanwhile, Ola hunched over the back porch, spitting up the faint yellow slime that comes at the tail end of the egg yolks.

The lightness left Izella, and her legs refused to propel her body forward from Mr. Turner’s yard. Shielded by thick, unpruned rose and raspberry bushes, Izella stood motionless as if shot by a stun gun. The blue sky began to change, and all of a sudden, she smelled it. Fresh rain mixed with 100 proof.

“Stripe of that on your tongue will make you forget about all that madness ’cross the way, young’un,” drawled Mr. Turner. He motioned a gallon glass jug of clear liquor toward her. “Gone on, chile. I ain’t seen somebody needing a capful of lightning much as you in a while.”

“What I look like to you?” Izella snapped before she realized. “A fool? You sweating rotgut from your pores.”

She jumped the fence as Mr. Turner called her a little bitch.

“Walter,” Izella urged, quickly approaching. “Come inside before the whole neighborhood sees you yelling at the empty sky. Drunk old Mr. Turner already saw you. Grab up Ola and bring her to the bed.”

Izella went ahead of them to check the bedroom. Just as she'd suspected, it was a wreck. She busied herself in a frenzy of cleaning. Stripping their yellow-crueted bed and throwing a clean cover overtop as Walter guided her wriggling sister on top of it.

Izella stared directly into Walter's face to calm his wild eyes. "I need you to wipe her up, you hear?" She nodded to encourage him to nod back, and then he did. "After she's good and clean, take that brush and pick the throw up out her hair, you hear?" When he nodded along, she continued. "After that, put her in the blue-and-white paisley-print dress with fresh bobby socks from that top drawer."

Walter raised his hand like he was in school. "What's paisley mean?" he asked.

Izella shook her head and softened her tone, forcing patience into herself. "The only blue-and-white dress in the closet. Now, I'm going to clean up the yellow in the bathroom so Evangelist don't see. I ain't got but a hour before she gets back home. Can you do all that for me?"

When Walter nodded again, Izella went to work cleaning up Ola's mess. Like always.

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"This house smell like Pine-Sol!" Evangelist yelled through the cracked door with glee. "You a child of God, Babygal."

She grabbed her youngest into a bear hug and hurried to the kitchen.

“Thanks, Mama,” said exhausted Izella.

Evangelist reappeared in the doorway, the glee replaced by furrowed, concerned brows. “What’s wrong?” She must know the truth about everything.

Izella glanced down at her cleaning shirt to see if Ola’s pregnancy was written out in big, bold letters. She felt her pockets for something to give away the whole truth. She found nothing. “What you mean?” Izella finally asked, confused and uncomfortable.

“You never call me mama, Babygal, unless something’s real wrong,” Evangelist said before taking a seat in front of her. “Sit a minute.”

“Nothing’s wrong, Ma . . . I mean, Evangelist.” Izella shook her head at her own fluster and sat next to her mother. “I’m fine . . . I really am . . .”

“You don’t look fine.” Evangelist redirected Izella to sit on the floor between her knees. “How ’bout I work some of these knots out your head and you tell me what’s what.”

Izella knew better than to tell her no. Between parishioners coming and going and Ola’s tantrums, alone time with her mother was a rare privilege in their home. And Izella, mature as she was, always longed for alone time

with her busy mother. She wasn't about to turn that down. Pregnant sister or not.

“Tell me about it, Babygal.”

As the wide-toothed comb dug into her scalp, Izella let the tension go from her face and hands and lower back. Evangelist applied just the right amount of comb pressure to make it almost hurt, but not quite. Izella's eyes rolled back a bit when her mother found a patch of dandruff and went to scratching it up. Large flakes flew and floated into her lap until her dark cleaning shorts looked whitish.

“You got a lot of good growing dandruff, Babygal,” Evangelist said. “But you ain't said what's troubling you yet.”

Izella wanted to blurt it out. It was the perfect time and place. In their calm, tiny, empty living room at Georgia dusk. Remnants of a hard rain dinging the roof and crickets screaming their white noise. Pine-Sol-soaked air and love. Pure love from a mama, filling up the shotgun house.

Just say it, she thought. You need help figuring this out. No fifteen-year-old should have a say in such things. Don't know enough to have a say. Tell your mama the truth, or you'll regret it. It would take less than a few seconds to say it out loud. And besides, you didn't do anything wrong. This is all Ola's doing. Stupid, stupid Ola

did this to herself. Why should you have to beat yourself to death trying to decide what stupid girls who go out and get pregnant by war-broke boys do with their babies? You ain't even been kissed. What do you know? Not a damn thing, that's what. Tell your mama. Izella opened her mouth to speak.

"All right then," Evangelist started. "I'll tell you 'bout my day, and then you might feel like telling after. I took Mississippi grits this morning. She's growing like a stuffed hog, that one. Child can barely fit through the doorway to grab her grits. I feel like that baby gone wind up raised in a house of hell with all kind of sin and debauchery. And she flighty, too. Clueless gal don't know her head from a hole in the wall. Ain't got a bit of business having no young'un. Big as she is, I wonder if she having twins, Lord have mercy. I thank heaven every day I ain't got to worry about that kind in my house. I work every day to make sure that ain't what my girls are doing. I tell you what I know. That's what you get when you ain't got God in your home. Spare the rod, spoil the child, and that daddy ain't never home with that poor child to give her no real discipline. And the mama been dead . . ."

Izella zoned out after that. Evangelist could go on bashing Mississippi for a full hour without breathing. Her mother accepted all sin as forgivable except out-of-wedlock

pregnancy. Izella had seen her forgive adulterous deacons, sloppy alcoholics, even murderers, but a young girl having a baby for a boy who didn't want her was the ultimate sin.

And here she was with one of those girls in her own back room. If she knew, she'd die. She'd have a heart attack right there in the living room and die. Izella didn't want her mama to die. She loved her mama just as much as she loved her sister. She couldn't tell her, because she couldn't kill her.

"Where's your sister at?" Evangelist asked after the longer-than-usual Mississippi rant.

"She sleep."

"That child can sleep clear through a twister in her front yard," Evangelist said with a small laugh. "Now sweep up this dandruff. We got to cook for the Tuskegee boys. They deserve the best we can give—chicken thighs, potatoes mashed up, and I bought a big bag of rutabagas from the farmer. You feel up to fixing them? You make rutabagas better than grown women."

Any other day, Izella would've been honored. In their house, that type of responsibility meant high esteem. It meant that her mother had faith in her. Izella longed for a day that simple. But those days were gone for now, maybe forever.

"I'll fix them up," Izella replied.

“Good gal. And wake up your sister so she can help you cut. Don’t let her season them, though. ’Cause Lord have mercy.”

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All six men wore hats and overalls. To Izella, they looked like elderly brothers—all sunburned, with thinning hair and short breath. Normal men like any other swinging by for supper. If Izella hadn’t known the truth, she would’ve thought them regular parishioners.

Evangelist kept referring to them as “them poor men.” So Izella expected them to be pitiful. They were not pitiful. They were comical and full of life and stories. Izella’s favorite smiled wider than a river. His beard had long gone gray and his eyes, too. Mr. Melvin was his name.

“How old you?” he asked Izella as she introduced herself. When she replied, he flew off into a story about his fifteenth birthday in Macon County, Alabama. “Sit down, boys, and I’ll tell y’all ’bout it.”

The other five men led him to Evangelist’s favorite rocking chair in the back corner of the living room as if he was their ringleader. Slow, gray, old, and more full of life than all the people put together under that roof.

“Careful, madam,” he started as the five left his side.

“I might have to take this here chair right along home with me when I leave.”

Evangelist laughed in a way she rarely laughed—full bellied and with pure, untouched joy. Ola, however, stood stiff and barely visible, half-hidden behind the long living room curtains.

“Go fix these nice men big plates, gals,” Evangelist instructed her daughters.

“Madam,” said Mr. Melvin. “Can I hold on to the fifteen-year-old for a quick bit? I promised her a story, and I hate to tell a lie. Even a little one. I promise to be quick.”

The other five men laughed at the last statement.

“When he says quick, ma’am,” said the youngest-looking man, in khaki corduroy overalls, “he don’t never mean quick.”

Mr. Melvin waved him off. “Don’t listen. They just jealous of my wit. God didn’t make but one of me, ma’am.”

The rest of them couldn’t help but nod in agreement.

“He’s right on that.”

“He ain’t never lying.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Evangelist smiled. “Yes, sir, Mr. Melvin. Me and my oldest can handle fixing y’all up something to eat. And please, call me Flossie.”

Ola and Izella reflexively caught eyes and smiled. It was the first smile Izella had seen out of her sister in days. It was fast and beautiful and full of that magnetic connection they'd had since her birth. They hadn't heard their mother ask anyone to call her anything but Evangelist ever. It was a first, right there in that living room. Even the sisters would never have known their mother's first name if not for the mail. And there she was, asking the charming gray man to call her that—Flossie. Definitely a first.

The evening was sweet and simple. And by the end, even Ola joined the circle of laughter. Izella drank it up like sweet tea. Her family as it used to be. As it should always be. Feeding those who started the night as strangers and would leave as brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers in Christ. Ministering through home cooking and kindness and no judgment whatsoever. Following the lead of those in need. Above all, laughter.

Mr. Melvin lifted a hidden cloud from overtop the small house with his Macon County stories. With the exuberance of a child, he told about sharecropping in hundred-degree weather, and the Tuskegee Airmen, and, finally, his bad-blood disease, syphilis.

He spoke about it as if he were speaking about someone else's unfortunate situation. Izella hadn't expected

him to speak of it. Most older men she knew puffed themselves up, but never revealed their struggles out loud. She'd always been bugged by that—men being big and bad and strong, but never human. Mr. Melvin, however, showed himself to the world unfiltered, flaws and all. He was the best man she'd ever met.

“The bad blood was a lie—y’all know that much,” he said with a small grin that never completely left his face. “They shot us up with poison, and Lord help us, we was being led to slaughter like baying sheep.”

“Are you angry at the white folks for doing that to you?” Izella asked. Her mother slung daggers at her through her eyeballs. “Sorry.”

“She’s lost her manners,” Evangelist told Mr. Melvin. “Know better than to ask grown folks questions like that, child.”

“Pardon, Ms. Flossie,” Mr. Melvin said before laying his large hand overtop hers and winking at her. “It’s value in an inquisitive child. And, by goodness, it’s a good question. If I may, I’d like to answer it. With your permission, of course.”

“Of course.” Evangelist softened like left-out butter. “My home is your home, kind sir.”

“Angry I am, child.” Mr. Melvin turned his wise eyes onto Izella. “Angry for my mama’s mama who was brought

over here in a big boat with no choice in the matter. Angry for my mama who picked cotton and nursed babies that wasn't hers. Angry for my daddy who sharecropped for thieving men. Angry for *your* mama who works her body and brain and hands bare with little recognition outside of her living room. Angry for these five men here with me who have to deal with my long-winded tongue." He chuckled. "Angry for they wives having to deal with the bad blood, too. And for they children for having to dodge it. Also, child, I'm angry for you." He stared at Izella, or through her. "And you." He then rested his gaze on Ola, who became noticeably uncomfortable.

"Why us?" Izella asked before she realized it. "Sorry, I . . ."

"It's okay, Babygal," Evangelist said in an uncharacteristically sweet tone; she *really* liked this man.

"Come here." Mr. Melvin motioned Izella and Ola to stand in front of him. "I got something to tell y'all."

Izella and Ola slowly made their way to his chair.

"Look here, both of you," he told them. "Times are getting better. But it's slow as a drip carving out a crater in rock. My mama's mama was a drip. My mama was a drip. I'm a drip. Your mama is a drip. And you both drips, too. Drip, drip, drip, drip. All of us. Slow, steady, making a tunnel to break the dam of real freedom.

“One time, when I was a boy, younger than both of you, I held a penny in my hands and flipped it high up in the air. It stayed up so long that I sat cross-legged there in the dirt, and waited all afternoon for it to come back down to me. The sun was so bright, I had to look away from it. I tapped my bare feet, drew faces in the ground, held my breath, turned circles, and spun and spun and spun. When the penny finally came back down, it had lost its copper color and was all dented up and battered. It came back different, but more valuable. Not more valuable to any other man in the world, though, you see?”

“If I walk in a store and slide that penny over the counter, any old man will just see a beat-up penny that’s lost its copper. He’ll see a penny that’s been clear to hell and back and came out not worth nothing but a single cent. But I see something different. I see me—an old, strong, resilient, powerful thing that may not be worth much of nothing to the world, but to God, I’m worth everything.

“I swear that thing flipped up so high it touched heaven, God kissed it, and sent it back to me.” Mr. Melvin lifted the penny from his pocket and handed it to Ola. “I only got one. I wish I could split it right down the seam for y’all gals, but I can’t. You keep this for me. I feel like it’s done just about all it can do for me.”

The entire room was in tears. Everyone, that is, except for Izella.

Izella never cried. It wasn't her way.

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The next day, Walter held Ola as they walked up Mrs. Mac's cracking pathway. Izella followed closely as an extra precaution in case Ola fell backward.

Ola was in bad shape. She'd moaned throughout the night, and Evangelist nearly beat the door down at midnight. Izella had to lie about stumping her toe on the bed frame to get her to go away. Walter wouldn't leave Ola's window. He stood beside the crack, whispering sweet encouragements to Ola all night. Through her moans, she begged him to go home and get some rest, but he refused.

Mrs. Mac burst through the screen door like a teenager. It was as if she were growing younger every day. Three days before, she had been a bedridden woman on the verge of death, but now she looked like a fifty-year-old. And a good fifty with shiny, silvery-gray, shoulder-length hair, glowing brown skin, and a springy, purposeful step. She'd been reborn through Izella and Ola's agony.

"Come on in, chillun!" she said, revealing a mouth filled with aged, sturdy teeth. "I got y'all ready some ginger-root tea made."

Izella went in first. The house had been rearranged completely, and despite the dust, it was relatively clean. A solid green-velvet settee with wooden claw-feet had been flipped right side up, the oak coffee table glistened, and the thick fibers of the purple area rug were still a hodgepodge from a brisk broom sweep. But the dramatic focal point of the room was the curio. The day before it was covered with a large, dirty sheet. It was out now. Magnificent and terrifying. Candlelit mahogany, tempered glass, as tall as the ceiling, and as wide as the full back wall, it dominated the small room. The curio itself was beautiful in a priceless sort of way, but the insides made it startling.

Men.

Every glass square held a hand-carved man. They looked to be made of acrylic and driftwood and sawdust and red dirt. Their eyes mismatched buttons snatched from random garments. Some had pipes hanging from their mouths, and others had no mouths, only shut zippers. One especially disturbing figure boasted a real train conductor's hat—it looked to be the only item in the curio that wasn't carved or molded. Izella counted forty-nine men—seven rows by seven columns. She had always been good at her multiplication tables. There was one empty slot at the very top. The fiftieth.

Ola's loud moans snapped Izella back.

“Ahhhh.” Ola yelled out a guttural, deep sob.

It sounded very much like a constipated bowel movement multiplied by a million, Izella thought. She sprang to her sister’s side. Walter looked so shaky and terrified that she feared he’d let her drop.

Izella caught Mrs. Mac smiling at her sister’s despair, and the instinct to run shot through her body.

“Sit her down here, child.” Mrs. Mac motioned toward the circular dining table with four cushy chairs, as if expecting them. “The gravid one next to me.”

Mrs. Mac had already placed piping-hot ginger tea at each place setting. The smell was sharp, like needles to the nostrils.

“Sip it slow,” Mrs. Mac told Ola. “The root will unruffle that babe.” Without permission, she lifted Ola’s sweat-filled shirt, placed her hand on her lower stomach, and closed her eyes. “It’s no wonder you screaming, child. She a jumping jack in there, twirling and leaping like a hopscotch.”

“She?” Ola said, perking up. “I’m having a little girl?”

“Sip,” said Mrs. Mac before lifting the cup to Ola’s bottom lip. “Better?”

Ola lifted her chin to force a swallow; then she smiled. “Better.”

“That root tells them old babies to quit their jig,” she

said, satisfied. “And yes, this is as girly a girl as I seen in a minute, child.”

A tear squeezed from the corner of Ola’s eye, and she looked at Walter. “A baby girl,” she told him.

He didn’t smile or cry or anything; he just shook his head in silence.

They ain’t no parents, Izella thought. They barely teenagers. The both of them.

“How do we get rid of it?” Izella interjected.

“You shut your filthy mouth!” Ola spat. “Ain’t no getting rid of nothing happening here. I’m having a girl, you hear?”

“Where you gone raise up this girl you gone have?” Izella asked angrily. “Evangelist’s house? Where she gone sleep? At the foot of our twin bed? Get real, you stupid girl! Your head is lost in the clouds.”

Ola couldn’t think of anything to say. Her hurt was too overwhelming to steer through by herself, so she looked to Walter. He was still shaking his head and rocking back and forth, arms folded tightly. They were a mess of their own making.

Mrs. Mac reached for Ola’s hand. “You ain’t got no place to put no baby, child. You ain’t even got no place to put yourself.”

Ola wailed. Not in physical pain—it was a bottom-

less, indescribable pain. A realization that she was the only somebody in the world who wanted her baby girl to breathe the free air. Even more than that, a realization that everyone around the table was right. Walter was a broken boy, and she had nothing in the world that belonged only to her—even her tiny bed was half Izella's. They couldn't possibly raise a baby. She searched her mind for someone to blame. Walter was too frail. Mrs. Mac was too foreign. Evangelist was too blind. Izella was left.

“I'll never forgive you for this.” She locked eyes onto her sister like an eagle to prey, and then turned her gaze to Mrs. Mac. “Go on, then—take my baby girl back to heaven, where she belongs.”

Mrs. Mac smiled, rubbing friction between her palms. “What are we waiting for, then?” Mrs. Mac pulled a crisp white sheet from a water basin in the center of the table and poured a beef-talla-smelling hot liquid from a heavy steel pitcher. Then she uncovered a small red bowl of cluck and guts, squeezed them with her fingers, and dropped them, too, into the basin. Finally, she lifted a bar of lye soap from her deep, sewn-on pocket and worked the slop into a lather. “All right, kids. This baby needs to be thrown into the wash.”