


Two sisters. Two journeys. One unexpected future.



bumped

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Bumped

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Balzer + Bray

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For Caitlyn, Carly, Cailey, and Zoë—
when you're old enough

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FIRST

The United States of America once ranked above all industrialized nations in the realm of teen pregnancy. We were the undisputed queens of precocious procreation! We were number one before, and we can be number one again!

—President's State of the Union Address

melody

Λυσιωπύ

I'M SIXTEEN. PREGNANT. AND THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON on the planet.

According to the Babiez R U ad, anyway.

"You're knocked up," sings the girlie chorus. "Ready to pop. Due to drop." The sixty-second jingle loops continuously in the dressing room.

I check the MiNet to make sure no one I know is shopping in this wing of the Meadowlands Mallplex. Most of my friends are still in bed sleeping off last night's Tocin hangovers. I'm safe.

"Do the deed. Born to breed."

Free from neggy eyes, I could act just like the fat and happy models in the commercials. I could shout, I could shimmy, I could show off every pound of my, um, *abundant awesomeness*. Such gushing doesn't come as naturally to me as it does to other girls. I have to work harder at it, the way my friends struggle to solve calculus equations that are easy for me. Preparing to pregg is a full-time job with no days off—but I don't have a choice. Not when there's so much at stake.

Rubbing my spectacularly distended belly, I want to try out an expression just to hear how it sounds coming out of my mouth.

"I'm . . ."

Egging. Preggiing . . .

"Fertilicious?"

My whole body sags under the weight of my sigh. I'm supposed to *own* my pregnancy because my *extra sixty is oh so sexy*, but I'd die of embarrassment if anyone I know caught me striking poses like this—especially Zen. So I guess it's a good thing that my best friend has made no effort to see me lately.

"Went forth and multiplied. Fightin' the omnicide . . ."

I check once more for anyone I know, then blind my MiNet with a blink-left-right-left-wink-double-blink. The song is wrapping up—"You're the most important person on the plaaaaanet. . . . Babiez R U!"—when I'm startled out of my reverie by the sound of my own voice.

"Well!"

I jump.

I've been so focused on my own expectant spectacle, I forgot that I'm not alone in the dressing room. Standing directly behind me is Harmony. Until a few weeks ago, we had never spoken. And until a few hours ago, we had never met in person.

She's my identical twin.

harmony

melody

I LOVE THE MEADOWLANDS MALLPLEX!

It's fast and loud and bright and buzzing with temptation but that's why I love it. I love it because there's no better place for me to do the work I was born to do: to spread the Word. Everyone in Goodside is already on message, but here there's an endless supply of sinners going down the wrong path. It's dizzying trying to decide who to witness to first. Or rather, next. After Melody.

I'm here because I lost my best veil. It was so silly, really. I didn't tell Melody the whole story because I was afraid she'd laugh at me, or compare me to a happy puppy as Angel did after she calmed down when she saw that my stunt on the bridge hadn't done anyone any harm.

Angel is the driver I called to take me to Otherside. I don't know if that's her name or not, but I like to think that it is. I had seen the billboard on Route 381 a few months ago, the last time it was my turn to leave Goodside to sell my fruit preserves at the Fayette County Farmers' Market.

Angel Cab Company
1-800-GOD-TRIP

The LORD will watch over your coming and going. Psalm 121

A pair of wings sprouted from the shoulders of the A in "Angel." It wasn't difficult to commit the ad to memory, though I'm not sure why I did. At the time, I didn't know about Melody and had nowhere else to go.

Angel isn't in the Church but she does have God, which is as blessed as you can get in Otherside. She pulled up promptly at four a.m. and was full of the spirit despite the short notice, early hour, and her advanced age. Her white hair was cropped like a newly shorn lamb's, her skin the warm brown of a biscuit ready to be taken out of the oven. With her crinkling eyes and ready smile, I trusted her immediately. Even more so when she asked, "Are you ready to let go and let God?"

I liked that. It reminded me that I wasn't leaving my faith behind, it's always here with me. "I am!" I said, buckling myself into the backseat.

If paying someone to take me from Goodside to Princeton sounds indulgent, you're right. But I don't know how to drive and have no access to mass transit maps and schedules and once I decided to leave I really didn't have any time to waste on figuring it all out. I made the right choice because Angel said it would've taken me sixteen hours and four transfers (bus, bus, train, train, shuttle bus) to travel three hundred miles. I might have made it past the Goodside gates, but probably not much

farther than that before someone took notice of the Church girl traveling all by herself. Angel Cab traveled the same distance in just over three. I was halfway to Princeton before first light, and arrived on my sister's doorstep in time for a breakfast prayer! The one-way fare cost all the money I had in the world, but that's just one of many worries I'm choosing not to bother myself with right now.

I've taken missionary trips to other mallplexes with my prayerclique, but I've always had a chaperone and traveled on the Church bus. I suppose I could have asked Melody to MiBuy me a veil—it isn't *quite* as important to try them on as I led her to believe—but I want to make the most of my time with her. I want to go out and see the world beyond Goodside. I want to reach as many people as possible. If I serve well, this could be a life-changing experience for both of us.

It has to be.

When Melody suggested we browse at Babiez R U, I got nervous. I knew it wasn't a place of righteousness. Stores like this make a mockery out of Heaven's greatest gifts and my housesisters testify all the time about how bad company ruins good habits, which is why I'm so lucky to have them in my life. But I have complete faith in my faith. There's no reason to be afraid of anything I see here.

I pray that by joining Melody in this store, we will finally twinbond. It's been a month since our miraculous reunion and she has yet to call me sister. In fact, she has yet to say much to me at all, unless I ask her directly. Melody has been open about herself but uncurious about me, answering ten times the number of questions that she has asked, a tally that stands at three: "What are you doing here?"; "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"; and "I don't think you'll need another veil while you're here but if it's that important to you then I guess we can go to the Mallplex, okay?"

Despite her reticence, just standing next to my sister is as exhilarating as cruising across the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, over the Delaware River, the cab taking me out of one state and into the next just as the sun crowned the horizon. . . .

That's how I lost my best veil.

I longed to merge with this glorious landscape! I longed to unite with the majestic skyline! I longed to revel in His goodness at a hundred miles per hour. I lowered the window and stuck out my head, and shouted out.

"Halllllleeeeeellllluuuuuujaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Angel screamed, swerved, screeched the breaks, and screamed some more. We were blessed that there aren't too many cars on the road at sunrise.

Once I was safe back inside the car, she prayed about my recklessness before saying she was surprised to see such behavior out of a Church girl like me.

"You don't need to return to His kingdom *right now*, do you, love?"

She was right. I didn't need to meet my Maker today. Especially after I'd gone through so much trouble to get here.

I'll never forget the sight of my veil in the split seconds after it freed itself from my tangled hair, soaring, up, up, upward, closer to Heaven, a dazzling flash of white against the pink and blue sky.

melody

Λυσιωπύ

I CAN'T GET A CLEAR LOOK AT HARMONY'S FACE. IT'S THAT veil.

I tried to talk her out of wearing it in public but she's not having it. In her defense, I guess it makes sense because why would she wear her veil in *private*? Harmony managed to lose her "best" veil during the ride to my house—this one is her backup—and she begged me to take her to Plain & Simple ("Modest Clothing for Modest Youth") to shop for a replacement. The veil is the official excuse for why we hauled all the way out to the Meadowlands Mallplex; the unofficial excuse is that I couldn't handle another minute trapped in the house with her as she went into raptures (not to be confused with *the* Rapture, which is one of her favorite topics) over the miracle of me. Of *us*.

I detoured at Babiez R U because I thought she would be a good audience for rehearsing the enthusiasm I need to pull off if I have any chance of taking over as president of the Pro/Am Pegg Alliance when my other best friend, Shoko Weiss, goes on birthleave.

The vice president and would-be successor, Malia Arroyo, is on what they call an indefinite leave of absence.

Speaking as her friend, I miss her.

But as her peer birthcoach, that's all I'm legally permitted to say on the subject.

Ventura Vida is running against me. She's new, so I've got seniority, but she's flaunting a twenty-four-week bump that is just too perfect and adorable not to vote for. Her family put her in private school when the public districts starting making all pegggers drop out of regular high school to attend a special school where they're all brainwashed into keeping their deliveries. Gah. It's not quite as bad as Harmony having to get *married*, but can you imagine? Ventura aspires to be the first Southeast Asian-American woman elected president of the United States and views tomorrow's vote as the first of many on the path to the White House. All of this should make her an interesting person that I would otherwise want to get to know if it weren't for the unfortunate circumstance of her being a total powertrippy bitch.

Harmony is almost a welcome distraction from what I have to look forward to at school tomorrow. Just thinking about all the drama gets my tubes in a twist.

Harmony takes a deep breath, the veil sucking up her nose, then murmurs something to herself—a go-to inspirational verse, probably—before making a go at talking.

"Well!" Harmony repeats brightly. "How many weeks is . . . ?" She points in the general direction of my belly.

"Forty. And twins."

"Twins! Like us!"

"It makes a bold statement," I say, rotating in front of the mirrors. "A twin having twins."

Harmony sucks in another lungful of air. “So true, sister!”

I cringe from the inside out whenever she says that word. I can’t change the fact that Harmony is my identical twin, but I don’t know if I’ll ever call this stranger my sister. Special emphasis on the strange part. I know Churchies are expected to fill their conversion quotas and all, but it was still a shock when Harmony asked if I had God within ten seconds of me answering the door.

“Do I have Him, like, in my *pocket*?” I had laughed, still stunned by her unannounced arrival.

“No, sister,” she had said without a trace of irony. “In your *heart*.”

I had gotten used to MiChatting with her a few times a week. Though she had extended countless invitations for me to visit her in Goodside—a trip I just wasn’t ready to make—she had made no mention of crossing into Otherside to see me.

So this was just too much. I mean, how do you think you’d feel if you opened the door at seven o’clock in the morning to see your exact double standing on your front porch, dressed all in white, clutching a shiny Bible in one hand and a banged-up suitcase in the other? I’m lucky I didn’t terminate right then and there. For serious.

It wasn’t until she hugged me (“Sister!”) that I realized I wasn’t hallucinating from a secondhand dose of Tocin. It really was Harmony on my doorstep. I wouldn’t have been so neggy if Harmony had *asked* to visit me. I don’t know the protocol for long-lost twin reunions or anything but at the very least she could have warned me.

All things considered, I think I’ve been handling things pretty well. I’ve come a long way since our first MiChat, when I barely managed to ask, “Harmony *who*? I’m your *what*?” I immediately quikwikied the birth certificates that proved it wasn’t a phishy scam and she really was my identical twin named Harmony who had set out to find her bioparents but found me instead. It’s not like I *never* wanted to meet her in person, I’m just not up for making major media right now, and being a monozygotic twin always attracts attention even when they’re not nearly as reproaesthetical as I am. (mean, we are.)

I’m not being braggy. It’s fact. I’m everything I’m supposed to be—attractive and intelligent, athletic and artistic, social and so on—only better. Ash and Ty, my parents, can’t take credit for my natural-born assets but they do deserve recognition for all the time, money, energy, and effort they put into perfecting them. Even their surname—Mayflower—boosts my brand. And yet, these pluses can only go so far. What a relief it was when the results of my YDNA test confirmed that I am indeed *the* dying breed of a dying breed, rare and highly valued in certain Eurosnobby circles.

Harmony too.

That’s another reason I was so put off this morning. It was one thing to hear her (my!) voice, but it was an entirely different thing to experience Harmony face-to-face. I eyeballed her blond hair and blue eyes, full lips and wide eyes, pert nose and high cheekbones, and panicked.

She’s counterfeiting me!

Then I took in her white veil and neck-to-ankle gown and unclenched. The Church is extreme even by *ordinary* God-having standards, so Harmony is off market. I wanted to make sure.

“So you’re set up,” I said, “like, to be a wife and mother.”

Harmony looked down at her gloved hands before answering. “Yes.”

“That’s great news,” I answered, because it was—for me.

I could be living a totally different life right now. Harmony and I could—and probably should—have been raised together. We don’t have many details, but from what we do know, it’s pretty clear our biomom was damaged goods by the time she dropped us off. The musical names she picked out for us are proof enough of her pharmaceutically addled mind. We were born addicted to whatever juke she was on, and came out such sickly, shrieky preemies that the counselors from Good Shepherd Child Placement Services thought we had a better chance of being snapped up as singletons than as a janky

twosome. Harmony was in worse shape than I was, and was taken in by the Church several weeks after I was placed with Ash and Ty.

My parents are beyond intense, but Harmony's off-grid upbringing has made me so thankful that mine adopted me and hers adopted her. With its ancient ivy-covered buildings, Princeton may not be the moddest hub on the Northeast Corridor but at least it just opened up an Underground All-Sports Arena and an Avatarcade. Harmony has spent her whole life in Goodside, Pennsylvania. She shares 6,500 square feet with three other families in one of the Starter Castles for Christ, those half-built McMansions in the never-finished gated enclaves bought dirt cheap by the Church in the late '00s. Harmony claims it's the largest settlement of its kind, which really isn't saying much when there's only a dozen or so in existence. The Church refers to the world beyond the Goodside gates as Otherside because it's subtle like that.

One thing I appreciate about Harmony is that I don't have to worry about encryption. Her immediate intentions are totally clear: She's here to make me get religion. And not just any religion, of course, but hers. If I'm married along with the rest of her housesisters by the end of the month, I think she scores some major bonus angel points toward a heavenly set of wings or a halo or something. Despite her invitations, I know I'm not welcome in Goodside and it's not because they fear HPSV. The Church is far more threatened by the possibility that I'll infect their minds with sin. I could flash my lab results proving that the damage has already been done to my reproductive system and there's no chance of catching the Virus from me, but they wouldn't even care. I was shocked when Harmony told me that they don't even *test* for the Virus in Goodside, because, as she explained, there is only one who can open and close the womb, and He flicks the switch from His heavenly throne. It's no mere coincidence then, as she also explained, that there are more women pregging in their twenties and thirties on her side of the gates than on mine.

Well. How can you argue against that?

harmony

melody

MELODY AND I CAME INTO THIS LIFE TOGETHER AND I'LL DO whatever it takes to see her in the next one. But, my grace, she's not making it easy.

I was surprised that she didn't even consider searching for her (our!) birthparents as soon as she came of age. That was my first order of business when I turned sixteen. She claims that she never sought the truth about our birthparents because it could bring more bad news than good.

"You weren't the least bit curious about who brought us into this world?"

"I've got the YDNA test results, and that's all I need to know," she replied. "Ash and Ty made me the person I am today."

I didn't understand this reaction at all. I've *always* felt the need to know the truth about my birthparents. I thought knowing them would help me better understand myself. Please don't think I'm disrespecting the Smith family by saying this. I don't remember when I was told that I was adopted, I can only say that I don't remember a time when I *didn't* know I was adopted. The Church has a long tradition of taking in the neediest infants—as it still does—and I was one of them. My parents were the angels entrusted with my care and protection and I'm forever grateful He chose them for me.

Always worried about my health, Ma never let me roughhouse and always lured me toward more meditative pursuits like baking and crafting. These skills, she knew, would serve me well when I turned thirteen and was picked for marriage in my Blooming. She taught me everything I know about what it means to be a good wife and mother, nourishing me with all the fruits of the spirit: joy, peace, kindness, faithfulness, and gentleness. What's happened to me since then isn't her fault. She did the best she could.

I wish more than anything I could tell her that right now.

Despite Ma's efforts, I've never felt . . . complete. I prayed and prayed and prayed. I asked why my birthparents had surrendered me and I got frustrated with Him for not answering. Until I knew, I would always feel like something—or someone—was missing no matter how hard or long or often I called on Him for help. Finally, after a difficult and dark period in my early Blooming, Ma took me aside and told me something I'll never forget.

"Prayers are answered in one of four ways," she said. "*Yes. No. I have something else in mind. And . . .*"

She paused long enough for my impatience to show. "And what's the fourth answer?"

"*Wait,*" she said.

I realized that maybe I wasn't ready for the answers God had in store for me.

And so I patiently waited until my sixteenth birthday when it was legal for me to unseal my birth documents.

HARMONY DOE

Placement: SMITH

Born: 05-02-2020 (approximate)

Birth Father: UNKNOWN

Birth Mother: UNKNOWN

Relations: MELODY DOE [See: MAYFLOWER]

Notes: Infant twin females born at approximately 32 weeks; required NICU intervention for detoxification and other development issues associated with preterm delivery; anonymously given up to Princeton Medical Center professionals in compliance with the New Jersey Safe Haven Act with handwritten note reading: "Forgive me, Harmony and Melody"; placed into permanent custody by the Good Shepherd Family Placement Services.

I had a twin.

A twin.

The Heavens opened for me at that moment. A twin! What a revelation! I made a choice right then and there not to mourn for the unknown parents I had lost, but to celebrate the sister I had found. My whole life I thought I was praying for my birthparents. Suddenly I knew who I was really praying for my twin. My sister. My other half. Though I didn't know my sister named Melody, I loved her already. Ma and Pa were never told about Melody and were even more stunned to find out about her than I was. Ma saw an opportunity to spread the Word.

"This is your purpose in life," Ma said. "Putting your sister on the right path for the next one."

I'm taking Ma's advice. Can I redeem myself if I bring Melody to Otherside to receive the sacraments? Despite her protests, I see the truth: Melody isn't sure of her decision to go pro. I know. And if she spends more time in my company, perhaps she'll want to follow me in faith. And she, in turn, just might give me strength to be the wife and mother I've so far failed to be.

"Am I fertilicious?" she asks. "Or what?"

I love my sister unconditionally—even if she makes it difficult to like her. Watching her as she unabashedly admires herself in the mirror, I realize that I have a long, hard road ahead of me. If only my relationship with Melody was as effortless as my relationship with God. Talking to God isn't a chore. I can let my true self shine in front of God.

melody

Λυσωρη

“DO YOU KNOW WHO ELSE MAKES A BOLD STATEMENT?” Harmony asks.

“God?” I try.

“Inspired answer, sis—!” Harmony stops herself short. “Melody!”

It’s Harmony’s mission in life to put the “fun” back in fundamentalism. She’s never happier than when she’s bragging on God. I’m about to tell her that she might want to dose down a bit when the Babiez R U salesclerk ducks her head through the pink-and-blue gingham curtains. Name tag: TRYNN

“You’re glowing!” Trynn gushes.

I caress my stretchy belly with pride.

“God-mocking,” chimes Harmony with cheery confidence.

Trynn is a skilled saleswoman and won’t be put off by Churchy negs on her trade. She puts two hands on my tumescent tummy. “Can you feel the kicking?”

I can.

“And you’ll note the tiny, tasteful stretch marks,” she continues, lifting my brand-new expandable contractable MyTurnTee.

Trynn looks to Harmony. “Are you interested in trying something on?”

Harmony primly pats her shoulder-length veil. “It’s against my religion.”

“Really? I wouldn’t have guessed,” Trynn says, stifling a snicker.

The clerk takes a step back to eye Harmony’s ivory veil, which matches the crisp cotton cap-sleeved ball gown with a sweetheart neckline and brush-the-floor train. She’ll wear a similar, if slightly fancier, gown on her wedding day, after which she’ll wear green gowns symbolizing fertility followed by pink or blue gowns—depending on the sex of her first child—to announce the fulfillment of her “feminine promise,” as she put it.

Only engaged girls wear veils, which is supposed to deflect unwanted male attention. That might work in Goodside, but here it has the opposite effect. She gets more attention all covered up than I would if I went around flashing my breedy bits all day long.

“Oh, yes,” says Harmony from behind the tulle scrim. “I’m just visiting. . . .” She tugs on the elbow-length glove covering her left hand.

“Is there a ring under there?”

Harmony stiffens for a moment then says, “Of course I’m wearing a ring!”

“Can we see it?” Trynn and I ask simultaneously.

“No,” Harmony says curtly. It’s a voice I haven’t heard before. “Showing off is the sin of pride. . . .” Her voice trails off.

“What’s his name?” I ask, realizing just now that in our MiChats Harmony gushed on and on about

God, but didn't say one word about her fiancé.

"Ephraim," Harmony says

"Ephraim?" Trynn asks. "That's an unusual name."

"Not where I'm from. There are four Ephraims in our settlement. It means 'doubly fruitful.'"

"Like you!" Trynn points at my belly.

"Everyone calls him Ram."

"Ram, huh?" Trynn licks her lips. "That's a breedy name if I've ever heard one!"

I'm not sure if Trynn is mocking Harmony or not. The trubie gear makes her an easy target for anyone but especially for bitter obsolescents. Just when I'm starting to feel sorry for the salesclerk's squandered reproductivity, Trynn says something totally barren to Harmony.

"That engagement gown is so *pure*," she says gently. "But aren't you, like, too *mature* to wear white? Shouldn't you be in the pink or blue by now?"

Harmony yelps from behind her veil. I can't see, but I imagine the blood draining from her face, until her pallid complexion matches her colorless dress. There's no way Trynn knew about the color-coded gowns without looking it up on the quikiwiki. She did it just to be neggy.

My face glows red with anger, which is weird because I barely know Harmony. I mean, we don't have anything in common, you know, besides our genetic material. I agreed to let her stay with me for a few days because Ash and Ty swear up and down that my heart-stopping story about long-lost twinbonding will help get me into Global U., a university so notoriously selective it makes Princeton look like a safety school. That's the only reason I didn't send her straight back to the farm this morning.

I know it's a scandal to say something like that, with multis like us being so prized and all. But the more Harmony talks, the more it becomes clear that the Church isn't giving much of a choice in the matter of marriage and motherhood. Zen says that she's trapped by her own false consciousness, which, by the way, is the nerdish kind of comment that could get a guy's ass kicked at our school—if that ass was anyone's but Zen's.

He's the only one who knows I've been in contact with Harmony. For as much as he loves to talk, he is surprisingly tight-lipped when he needs to be. As such, he's the keeper of many of Princeton Da Academy's deepest secrets. Of course, that doesn't stop him from privately warning me that coming into identical twinhood at sixteen will for seriously damage my fragile psyche or whatever. But it hasn't. *Harmony's* the one who stalked our bioparents. She's the one having the identity crisis, not me. These days the majority of deliveries in this country aren't raised by their bioparents, and they should all follow my example by having the same attitude.

Don't fit me for a veil or anything because I can be sympathetic to Harmony and still have issues with her way of life. But before I have a chance to put the salesclerk in her place, Harmony breaks the awkward silence.

"I was engaged at thirteen years old."

What?! She never said a word about her starter engagement! At thirteen I wasn't even close to making my own commitment, no matter how much parental pressure I was under. Which was a *lot*.

"But God had another plan!" Harmony adds a bit too eagerly. "I keep telling my sis—" She stops herself. "I keep telling *Melody* that it's not too late for her to get a husband. There are plenty of eligible bachelors in Goodside."

I snort-laugh. Harmony is just too funny. Sometimes I wonder if Church leaders are slipping Toci or some other prescription-strength love drug into the sacramental wine.

Trynn turns to me. "I assume *you're* here for nostalgia's sake," she says, still hoping to make the sale. "Let me guess. You're in between bumps and want to relive the best nine months of your life?"

I reluctantly flash back to Malia.

“The worst nine months of my life!” she howled. “For what?”

I hate thinking of her in that state.

I open my mouth but nothing comes out.

Harmony mutters another prayer and hooks an arm around my shoulder. And as much as I know that she’s doing this just to prove that she’s the kindhearted twin, I’m comforted by the gesture.

“My extra thirty is oh so flirty!” chirp voices outside the dressing room.

A tweenage trio comes swaggering into the dressing room. The tweens accessorize their sparkly T with matching First Curse Purses, the menarche must-have for stashing the pads and tampons they’ll need *any minute now*. The target demo for Babiez R U, they steal Trynn’s attention.

“I see you’re considering the Preggerz FunBump with real skinfeel and in-uterobic activity!” she says to the one with red hair holding up the fake belly she’s ready to try on. The front of the redhead’s T reads: DO THE DEED. As she hops around in excited circles, I catch the phrase on the back: BORN TO BREED.

Indeed.

“She’s wearing size Forty-Week Twins,” Trynn continues, pointing to my distended stomach. “That’s way too big for you! Size Twenty-four-Week Singleton is perfect for a girl your age. . . .”

I think of Ventura Vida’s adorable six-month bump and a wave of nausea rolls right over me. Harmony can’t pass up another opportunity to get preachy.

“When I was your age,” she offers, “I was leading my own prayerclique!”

The twelve-year-olds giggle nastily.

That’s it. I terminate. I skulk behind the curtains, strip off the Preggerz FunBump, and hang it on the wall hook. I had come here today hoping that the experience would help me feel breedier than I did before Malia’s meltdown, but all I’ve done is remind myself just how far behind I am. Unburdening myself of the fake belly does little to improve my state of mind. The MyTurnTee shrinks to fit my ta abdominals and my mood shrivels with it.

Harmony peeks behind the curtain. “Can we please head over to Plain & Simple now?”

“Sure thing.” And before I can stop myself: “Maybe there’s a sale on tasteful straitjackets.”

It was a for seriously pissy thing to say. I don’t know why I’m taking out my frustration on her.

Harmony clasps her hands and quietly sighs behind the veil. “Oh my grace.”

She lifts her veil so I can see her face. It takes my breath away whenever she does this. It’s surprisingly easy to forget that there’s another person on the planet who was born looking *exactly* like me, only frecklier. Harmony gestures for me to lean in closely to hear what she has to say.

“Pursue faith and love and peace,” she says in a quiet but confident voice. “Enjoy the companionship of those who call on the Lord with pure hearts.”

Harmony lets the veil fall back over her face, pulls the curtains together, and leaves me alone to consider her biblical wisdom.

The FunBump squirms against the back of the dressing-room wall, and one of the twins’ elbows or maybe a knee pokes out of the bogus belly. What felt like an organic extension of my own body just moments ago now makes me more squeamish than my worst case of Sympathetic Morning Sickness. I stab my finger deep into the belly on/off button more aggressively than necessary and the FunBump goes limp.

“You’re knocked up,” sing the little girls along with the incessant Babiez R U theme song. “Ready to pop, due to drop.”

It’s hard not to get jealous of these nubie-pubies who—if they’re pretty enough, smart enough, and healthy enough—should already be getting wooed by RePro Representatives. Those were the *best* times, when I was still all promise and potential. Because right now I’m definitely *not* the most important sixteen-year-old on the planet. Not even ish. I’m just another prebumped girl dangerously

close to wasting her prime reproductivity.

Since the nubie-pubies caught me by surprise, I check my MiNet. I'm not expecting to spot anyone I know when—gah!—I get a positive MiD.

harmony

melody

I'M BEING PATIENT, KEEPING AN OPEN HEART, FORGIVING Melody for her participation in the buying and selling of blasphemous synthetic blessings when she comes running out of the dressing room blind-wild as a beheaded chicken.

"I can be anywhere but here!" she cries in a mad dash for the door.

Praise the Lord. Could it be I'm already having a positive influence on her?

"Wait for me!" I'm struggling to keep up with her, briefly regretting my decision to wear this particular gown. It's difficult to walk, let alone run. Such are the challenges when one is expected to serve as a powerful example of faith and female purity.

"Melody!"

I'm starting to think that I will never catch up when I hear a tenor voice behind me calling the same name.

"Melody!"

A whiplike figure streaks past me, quickly overtakes my sister, and stops right in her path. She screeches to a halt in front of an archway of red, white, and blue balloons. It's clear even at a distance that this boy with big hair and even bigger grin has done what I couldn't: made her burn with embarrassment.

I catch up to them at the patriotic display at the entrance to the U.S. Buff-A.

"The Meadowlands Mallplex has five million square feet of commercial enterprise and destination entertainment," the boy says, waving his arms at the stores all around us. "What are the odds of me *randomly* stumbling into your facespace?"

"None." She's pressing her lips together to stop herself from catching the boy's contagious grin. I'm smiling at him and I don't even *know* him. "I haven't seen you for, like, *ever*, and now all of a sudden you get stalker on me? How did you even find me here anyway? I blinded my MiNet."

The boy's smile gets bigger. And so does mine.

"Your MiNet blind is an insult to hackers everywhere."

"You hacked my MiNet?" She sounds more amazed than annoyed. "Again?"

The boy and Melody are exactly the same height, though the tips of his hair—dark and spiky like sprigs of blackrot rosemary—give him an extra few inches. He only has to take a step toward her to look her straight in the eyes.

"Blink-left-right-left-wink-double-blink," as his eyes follow those same commands. Melody gasps, squeezes her eyes tight, and sighs in resignation. He, having made the desired impact, takes a step back and thumbs in my direction. "Is that *her*?"

"No," Melody says drily. "That's the third sister, Symphony. And there are two more at home who

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