

# GIRL ON THE FLY

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# GIRL ON THE FLY

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*For Joy, Nsaba, Esperanza and Imani,  
our girls poised to soar!*



# HEARTBEATS

Baba says when I was small, I was always on the hunt for heartbeats. I'd snuggle in his arms, clamouring to hear the steady *boom, boom, boom* beating from somewhere deep in his chest. The story goes I would try to find the sound of a heartbeat just about everywhere. Anywhere. Baba also likes to say that if I'd been born in Tanzania, like him, he would have taken me to the family farm with its millions of goats and chickens and cows, and I would have found way more heartbeats than I knew what to do with.

But that's just Baba being Baba!

Instead of chasing farm animals, I used to cup my hand behind my ear and press it against tree trunks. Flower petals. My dolls and my trucks. Even the dirt-caked soles of Odie's feet. That was before we grew up and grew out of that kind of stuff. And obviously before I truly understood what a heart was. Or where to find one.

Truth be told, I don't actually remember hunting for heartbeats.

My memories don't reach that far back.

What I *do* remember is what happened when I started running. That's when I became a hurricane of arms and feet and one gigantic heartbeat.


BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

It's also when Alexis, Neeka, Luce and I started flying around the track, *smack, smack, smack*, smacking a baton into the palms of each other's hands.

When we forgot everything, except our rhythm and flow.

When we found freedom . . . and the thrill of soaring across the finish line.

Thinking back on it now, though, I wonder. When I was small and searching everywhere and anywhere, in every little thing, for that steady *boom, boom, boom*, what exactly did I think I was looking for?



PART ONE:  
**ON YOUR  
MARKS**

Philadelphia 1992



# 1. SOMETHING EXTRA

‘We don’t need something extra,’ Neeka said with her chest puffed up. ‘We’re fast . . . *remember?* Plus, we’re thirteen.’ She tilted her head towards the sun, which was just starting to slant down low. Bronze shadows cut lines across the red-brick wall behind her.

It was a Friday afternoon in April, and we were the last girls on the track. Since practice was done for the day, I thought Neeka would be easier to convince. But her hands stayed glued to her hips. Her face wouldn’t give either.

Level ten hard-headedness.

‘Trust me,’ I said, squaring my shoulders. ‘We do.’

Being fast wasn’t enough.

And even though we’d been counting down the days until Luce finally turned thirteen – she was the last one in the group – that wouldn’t cut it either.

If we wanted to win our relay race at the two biggest track meets of the season – *our last two races together* – something extra was a must.

‘What about our race day nicknames?’ Luce asked, smacking her lips like her bubble gum was lunch. ‘Those *gotta* count?’ She was sitting down in front of us on the thick white line that split lanes four and five. Her tube socks, hiked up all the way to her kneecaps, made her look even tinier than she already was.

‘Nope. Don’t count,’ I said. ‘First, we’ve had those nicknames since fifth grade. If they held any drop of extra luck, we’d be state champions by now. Second, we need something with more flair. Something with rhythm and a beat to it. Something supersonic!’

Luce looked at me. Her right eyebrow rose.

She shimmied her pint-sized shoulders, I slid my steps and we shouted out in unison just like the J.J. Fad song.

Luce loved that old song even more than I did.

We could dance all day every day to it.

One Saturday last year we *did* dance all day to it.

I could hardly bear to think about Luce moving away at the end of summer.

Who else had clown antics to keep me in stitches?

No one.

Alexis was too Alexis.

And Neeka? She was only silly when the Holy Spirit moved her.

Which was never.

Luckily, when we ran the 4 x 100 relay, none of that mattered.

On the track, we moved like rhythm and beat rolled into one.

And with Luce leaving, this championship season would be our last time to flow together.

So, losing wasn’t an option. We had to win.

And we had to win BIG.

That’s why we *really* needed something special!

While Luce cracked a million more Bazooka bubbles, Alexis jogged over, cool as a breeze. She was the last of us to finish. But she must’ve caught snatches of our conversation on her last loop because here she was, slipping in her two cents.

‘What we *need*,’ Alexis said, the words gliding right out of her mouth, ‘is some majestic flyness.’ She reached her hand up and pushed a bobby pin deeper into the bun coiled tightly on top of her head. Then she licked her fingers and smoothed down her baby hairs. ‘That’s how we win the 4 x 100 relay this year.’

And winning was everything!

## 2. MAJESTIC FLYNESS

Technically, the four of us – me, Neeka, Alexis and Luce – had placed before.

Lots of *second* places.

I thought about the picture of Flo-Jo I had tacked up on my bedroom wall.

The fastest woman on earth.

Her 4 x 100 relay team *had* won first place. And not just *any* first place.

They'd struck gold four years ago at the 1988 Olympics, half-way across the world in Seoul. Flo-Jo had her 'something extra' in spades.

Six-inch gold nails that turned into mini-magic wands.

They helped her cut through the wind.

And her one-legged track suits sent her flying like a blazing comet.

She was majestic flyness in motion. She had to be. Because nobody remembered who came in second.

And I wanted the four of us to remember each other forever.

'Majestic flyness,' Neeka said, repeating Alexis but staring straight at me. She finally dropped her hands from her hips and nodded her head. 'Now that's what I'm talking about.' The gold specks in her green eyes jumped around like fireflies, which meant she'd finally turned the corner from hard-headed.

I frowned. 'Isn't that what I said?'

'No,' Neeka answered back. 'You said something extra, which is like a soggy side of fries.' Luce stifled a laugh.

I shook my head. 'No, it's—'

'Can you two stop and let me finish?' Alexis said, speaking over me. Her eyes brightened. 'Here's my idea. We need a song.' Then she leaned back and spread her hands wide, like her grand idea had been written in the sky.

'A rap?' Luce asked, from down below. All three of us put our hands on our hips and made the same exact slow roll in her direction.

'A song, not a rap, Luce,' Alexis corrected in her teacher's voice.

'Maybe a chant,' I said, slowly nodding my head.

We grabbed our gear and started walking towards the school.

'That's it,' Alexis said to me, shoving my shoulder. 'A chant. You could write it, too. The way you map everything out . . . and go on and on ad nauseam about rhythm.'

'Ad *who*?' Luce asked, her eyes ballooning.



Alexis smirked, at me or Luce I didn't know, but I knew she was right. I had blueprints in my mind for a world of things. I guess because I liked knowing exactly how things were going to begin and how they were going to end.

I loved things that flowed, too.

Songs flowed. But chants?

They had a special kind of rhythm all their own.

Momma spoke chants sometimes with her women's circle.

But those weren't the right kind.

My mind flashed to the only other time I'd heard one live.

It happened when Baba took me to a high school basketball game.

I was sitting on the edge of the bleachers with my head buried in my knees. My fingers were reaching for the laces of my high-tops, making a special loop so they stayed tied tight. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the away team march in. Only thing is, they started spelling out their team's name in unison, eyes straight ahead, clapping and stomping to their own beat as they made their way to the bench.

*H – clap, clap, stomp, clap*

*A – clap, clap, stomp, clap*

*W – clap, clap, stomp, clap*

*K – clap, clap, stomp, clap*

*H – clap, clap, stomp, clap*

*O – clap, clap, stomp, clap*

*U – clap, clap, stomp, clap*

*S – clap, clap, stomp, clap*

*E – clap, clap, stomp, clap*

They filled the whole gym with their sound.

It floated high above the hardwood floors all the way to the rafters.

This wasn't some ordinary cheer. It was like their very own battle cry.

They'd put a stamp on it.

I swear even the fluorescent lights shone brighter. I'm pretty sure the home team got the message too. Because they quit passing balls back and forth and stood awestruck.

Hawk House had conjured up something really special.

And when they won, you think anyone was surprised?

Of course not.

The chant was that extra magic touch that pulled their team together and kept them focused. It was so powerful I still remembered it vibrating through my entire body. It was maybe even so powerful it would keep Hawk House bonded for life. I snaked my arm around Luce's neck as we reached the double doors. A cool blast of air hit my face as I walked in and tried to keep the wheels in my head from spinning too fast. By the time I hefted my

backpack over my shoulder and we walked out of the locker room, I was sure.

I'd write something like that for us.

Something that would help us steady our steps and stay in sync.

Something that would guarantee our greatness and send us straight across the state championship finish line in first place . . .

Something none of us would ever forget!

### 3. T MINUS TWO WEEKS

After practice, I made a mad dash home. The regional championship meet was only two weeks away. The big state meet would follow soon after. I didn't have a whole lot of time to conjure up something solid gold. Especially from scratch.

The plan was simple.

When I got home, I'd dodge Momma, tear up the stairs to my desk, and wait for the magic to pour from my mind like a fountain of wisdom.

We'd be ready for the championship meets in no time.

That *was* the plan.

But as soon as I thundered through the front door and started to unlace my sneakers, I saw problem number one: Momma wasn't there to dodge. She should've been standing in the front hall, tap-tap-tappity-tapping her foot and snapping at me for the mess I was just about to make.

I walked to the kitchen door and poked my head around. That's when I saw problem number two: no snack waiting for me on the table. No kettle on the stove. In this house, there was *always* a kettle screaming at five p.m. Five-thirty at the latest on the days Momma had a straggling client.

Today, though?

Nothing.

I followed the sound of hushed voices to Baba's study.

That's when I saw problem number three. The *real* problem: three adults talking super sly.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' Aunt Darien said.

Aunt Darien and Momma had been best friends since forever. Long before I was born. Aunt Darien's son, Odie, was my best friend, too. Or at least he was until our friendship suddenly screeched to a halt earlier this year. I still hadn't figured out exactly how to fix it.

'Us, too,' Momma said in a serious voice. 'It's very sad. And she's such a lovely girl. Well, she's a woman now, really, with her own kids.' Her shoulders rose and fell in a sigh. 'This must be so hard on the kids.'

'I'm sure it is,' Aunt Darien said. 'How many does she have?'

'Three,' Momma answered back.

'But the kids are in boarding school so they will stay in Tanzania. Only Rose is coming.' That was Baba piping in. He leaned over from his desk, where he was sitting, and clasped his hands just as I slunk in.

'Coming?' I asked, extra quiet.

Three heads turned towards me.

Momma glanced down at her watch and then looked back at me like I'd beamed down straight from Mars.

A thick silence hung in the air while everyone stayed still.

It was the kind of stillness that shook and the kind of silence that screamed.

Aunt Darien spoke first. 'Such a lovely surprise to see you, Kam.' She looked from Momma to Baba, pressed her hands into her knees, and stood up from the couch. She walked over and planted a kiss on my cheek. 'You need to come over more. I haven't heard you and Odie and your ear-splitting music in a while.'

I guess she didn't know how much things had changed.

How out of step Odie and I were now.

I looked down at my feet. 'Yeah . . . I guess we aren't hanging out as much.'

Aunt Darien slung her purse around her shoulder and smiled. 'I never thought I'd say this but . . . I'd love more of your loudness. I know you're busy, but make sure I see you . . . or at least hear you soon.' She turned to Baba and Momma. 'And if you guys need any help with your visitor, just shout. You know where to find me. Hopefully her visit will be the end of the family trouble.' She gave me a tight squeeze before she walked out, while I chewed my lip.

Trouble?