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Oprah Winfrey,
Lynn Whitfield and
Merle Dandridge

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DOUBLE ISSUE

COVER STORY

Greenleaf

SEASON PREMIERE

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KINDRED SPIRITS

The family at the center of OWN's church drama *Greenleaf* are in one holy mess. Can they find the light? Lynn Whitfield, Oprah Winfrey and Merle Dandridge preview Season 2 BY **MICHAEL LOGAN**

ALL HELL IS breaking loose in the house of the Lord! OWN's flagship series, *Greenleaf*—a glamorous, sin-packed melodrama about a black megachurch in Memphis—ended its premiere season with family pedophile Uncle Mac (Greg Alan Williams) getting out of jail by incriminating his revered brother-in-law, Bishop Greenleaf (Keith David), for arson and manslaughter. Now the dominoes fall.

When the show returns, three months have passed and the bishop is enmeshed in scandal, church profits are plummeting, and sister-in-law Mavis (Oprah Winfrey) has become a pill-popping drunk. But the bishop's highfalutin wife, Lady Mae (Lynn Whitfield), remains in deep denial, refusing to acknowledge that she knew Mac molested her daughter Faith—a horrifying situation that led to the girl's suicide.

Then there's eldest daughter Grace (Merle Dandridge), the avenging angel who exposed Mac and got him arrested. "Grace came back to town to set things right in her dysfunctional family," says series creator Craig Wright. "But she's like a universal acid that cuts through everything. All this chaos can be

traced directly back to her." And how's this for irony? With the bishop sidelined, it's now up to Grace—who has big issues with God—to save the church she intended to bring down. "Grace is our Michael Corleone," says executive producer Clement Virgo. "She wanted nothing to do with the Greenleafs, but now that the family is in crisis, she's been pulled back in."

Can Grace save her father's legacy? Will Lady Mae ever wake up? Does Mavis survive her descent into the valley of the dolls? Winfrey, Whitfield and Dandridge have come together at the luxurious Bacara Resort & Spa in Goleta, California (just a hop, skip and limo ride from Winfrey's home in Santa Barbara), to share some grim but super-soapy news: It's going to get a whole lot worse for the women of *Greenleaf* before it gets better!

How can such a powerful, pillar-of-the-community family collapse so quickly?

Whitfield: Delusion! Denial! You can go only so long fooling yourself. Grace, with her need for justice, forced the family to look at its secrets. And now



Whitfield, Winfrey
and Dandridge

they're dealing with the consequence of that. But even when the truth is put square in your face, you can still continue to avoid it.

Winfrey: By making sure everything stays looking perfect on the outside—the mansion, the flowers, every beautifully folded napkin, every fork! That's Lady Mae.

Whitfield: Playing this part makes me wonder how Rose Kennedy held things together, with all that loss, all that infidelity. Lady Mae thinks if she can control her environment then everything is going to be OK. And, of course, that's not what happens this season.

Winfrey: [Laughs] Oooh, just wait! One of the great lessons I've learned is that life first speaks to you in a whisper. If you don't hear it, then you get a thump. If you don't feel that thump, then you get a brick upside the head. The first season we were whispering and thumping. Season 2 is the brick!



David and Whitfield

Dandridge: That's why this show is so important. There are many families who can't see what's happening in their own families. This show is saying, "It's time to take the blinders off!"

Winfrey: Lynn and I had a confrontation scene at the end of last season where I got to say everything I had wanted to scream on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. I did 127 shows on child abuse in one form or another, talking to molesters, victims, parents. So many people sense something's going on and look the other way. But Mavis is outright saying to Lady Mae, "You knew! You knew!" This is a very important storyline

for the culture, and especially for black families.

And is that message getting through?

Dandridge: I know for a fact that it's working because people walk up to me now—multiple times each day—to tell me their most intimate secrets, often involving abuse. It's as if they are almost compelled to open up. I think, by proxy, they are sharing their stories with Oprah.

Winfrey: No, Merle, it's *you* they want to share it with. That used to happen with me when I first came out and said I'd been sexually abused. I was deluged with people saying the same thing happened to them. But what I think is specifically going on here is that we had one of our young female characters, who had been abused by Mac, come to Grace and tell her story. People are seeing that you are a safe space, Merle. And many are saying, "Hey, maybe there's a Grace out there for me."

Greenleaf seems to be an extension of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in many ways.

Winfrey: It's true. I don't let these things go! I can't. Not when sexual predators walk free, which happens more often than not these days. One out of four teenage girls in this country is being battered or abused by a boyfriend, so this season we're also doing a domestic-violence story involving our younger girls, Zora [Lovie Simone] and Sophia [Desiree Ross]. That's the subject that brought my talk show its first Emmy. And through our character Kevin [Tye White], we're dealing with homosexuality and life on the down-low and the black church's reaction to that.

For a series about a religious family in turmoil, God seems to be missing from the equation.

Nobody's praying for help.

Whitfield: This family has lost its way. They really love God, but now they are functioning out of fear and ego. It'll be quite an adventure for them to get back to remembering, with humility, where the true power lies. But, for now, they are spiritually distracted.

Dandridge: And isn't that so human? I've met many people in the ministry who are in the machine and talkin' the talk. But what is their personal relationship with God?

The Greenleafs also spend their money like drunken sailors—money that could be going to godlier causes.

Whitfield: We beg the question: Who, really, are you following? God, or the preacher with the fancy suit and the private jet?

Winfrey: But here's what you have to understand: Black people really want their pastors to live well.

Whitfield: They are disappointed if they don't!

Winfrey: They will sacrifice and give their hard-earned money to make sure that the first lady of the church looks great and that the bishop has the very best car.

Whitfield: It's kind of a monarchy—like the people in



Winfrey and Dandridge

"Life first speaks to you in a whisper. If you don't hear it, then you get a thump. If you don't feel it, then you get a brick upside the head. Season 2 [of *Greenleaf*] is the brick!" —Winfrey

England who love seeing their queen in all her finery.

Winfrey: When I was growing up, our first lady in the black Baptist church was no different than the first lady in the White House. Because the black church is our White House.

Mavis has gone off the deep end. Who knew her sobriety was so shaky?

Winfrey: She lost the bar that she owned, which was her life, her identity, and at first she thought she was handling it, but she wasn't. I get that. All my father did was talk about retiring, so when I first came to Chicago, I retired him. I said, "You don't have to work at the barbershop anymore." And he tried it. For two days. He couldn't retire because his identity is that barbershop. And he's still there today. [Laughs] You can call him up right now.

So you're loving Mavis's meltdown?

Winfrey: Yes! I looked at the first season and went, "Whoa! She is so damn earnest that it makes me tired!" She was too stoic and a little boring. I was like, "Give that woman a tequila shot!" This is much more interesting, and it also gives me a way out.

Meaning what? That you plan to leave the show?

Winfrey: I wanted to act in *Greenleaf* to make sure I

was doing everything possible on my end to make it fly. And now it's flying beautifully. The show carries itself. So, yeah, I think Mavis may have to go off and take care of her addiction very soon. [Laughs]

After all this fallout, how can things ever be OK between Grace and Lady Mae?

Dandridge: It's going to take a lot of prayer. [Laughs] And a lot of therapy! It's a deep rift but, in the end, we are connected by love and by blood. This is family.

Whitfield: Some of this may seem irreversible, but we're a healing show.

But how much healing do you want to do on a show that spins on backstabbing and deceit? *Greenleaf*, despite its messages, is really intended to be a *Dynasty*-like guilty pleasure, isn't it?

Whitfield: We know we're primarily here for entertainment, but our audience really does want our characters to come together. The biggest comment about Lady Mae on social media is "Why can't she just give Grace a hug?"

Dandridge: Forgiveness is everything. But we are not looking to clean this up quickly.

Whitfield: No, we're not! [Laughs] We're going to take our sweet time getting to the Promised Land! ■

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