

"Chelle."

*Clunk. Swish. Clunk. Swish. Clunk. Swish.* The steady, methodical, rhythmic pattern was almost hypnotizing, so much so that it drowned out everything around her. Her hands reached into a box, grasping the girth of ten CD jewel cases by touch. The CD's *clunked* onto the shelf and then *swished* down to join the others next to it. The process repeated until the box was empty, and then it was on to another artist.

"Chelle."

This time, Rachelle heard but ignored the voice behind her. Instead she concentrated on the sound. *Clunk. Swish. Clunk. Swish. Clunk--*

"Chelle!" A long finger nail poked into her shoulder as it tapped her. "I know you hear me! Your mama just called. She said don't take too long comin' home. Got school tomorrow and the twins need their clothes ironed."

Rachelle sucked in a breath through her nose, held it, and then exhaled slowly while letting the last of the box of CD's *swish* down the shelf to join its companions. She sat back, admiring her handiwork, reaching out to finger the edges of the jewel cases, all lined up and symmetrical, in perfect alphabetical order.

*Lucky, she thought to herself, only briefly guilty for being jealous. Ya'll have already made it. Already famous. Already living out your childhood dreams. Wish I could be you. Instead, I got to go home and iron clothes for 12 year olds that ought to know by now how to iron their own clothes.*

Reluctant, Rachelle stood from her squatting position in front of the stacks. Her knees popped and her back ached and her feet tingled. It had been a long day. Mondays always were. Tuesday was the day that new releases went on sale, so every Monday night, the staff stayed after the 10pm closing time to stock the new music and movies. Her cousin Nala worked the video department. Rachelle worked music. It didn't matter to Rachelle how long or hard or tense the day had been. She looked forward to Monday nights. Just her and boxes and boxes of CD's.

Boxes of daydreams. Boxes of wishes. Boxes of inspiration and hope. She often caught herself daydreaming, absentmindedly *clunking* and *swishing*. Someday, maybe one day soon, it would be her name and face on a glossy booklet, slid into a jewel case, paired with a disc of her voice and her spirit in words and melody and harmony, shipped off to some random music store in who-knows-where, to be purchased by some young girl who hoped for the same thing to happen to her. It was an endless cycle, one she hoped to keep going.

"I'm done," Rachelle muttered, brushing past Nala, who stood in the doorway, leaning up against the doorjamb with arms folded and her lips pursed. Nala was cousin and best friend and confidante and coworker all wrapped up in a ball. No one knew Rachelle like Nala. No one knew Nala like Rachelle.

"I can't wait to get out of here. You don't even seem like you want to go home."

"I don't," said Rachele, walking ahead of Nala. The two walked out of the stacks, past the manager's office to the employee lounge and the lockers. Rachele's was number 46. She twisted the lock, the combination seared into her brain so long ago that her fingers just naturally twisted the correct code- 19-6-9- the year that changed her life, though she hadn't even been born, yet. In 1969, Maya Angelou published the first of her autobiography series, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. Rachele owned a worn, faded, dog-eared, much loved copy and read and reread it and read it again, so often that she could recite it by heart, if you let her. Rachele read a little bit of herself in that story of a young Maya, silenced by something greater. A girl with no voice but lots to say.

Backpack in one hand, car keys in the other, Rachele stood against the bank of rusted, steel lockers and watched Nala dig her book bag, purse, and jacket out of her locker. A combination lock dropped into a bag that was then slung over her shoulder. Nala reached out to flip the light switch as she led the way out of the room and through the now dimly lit, quiet store and to the front door.

Muggy air, thick with moisture hit them square in the face, nearly choking them as they filed out of the store. Rachele locked the floor to ceiling glass doors behind them. Nala yawned and ambled toward her car, parked next to Rachele's ratty Chevy mini-van. It used to be the family van, but as the older siblings reached driving age, it became "the kid's car".

"Man, I have been up since six o' clock today. Lord knows I ain't got no business being awake right now. And I got about two hours of studying before I can go to sleep."

Rachele yawned in sympathy, her eyes watering with the effort. "Girl, I hear you. Mama got me up at six to get everybody off to school and then I had chores to do and dinner to start and I had to be up here at two. Didn't get no nap today. And now I got to iron clothes. Those big ol' babies be burning their clothes on purpose, with that iron." She laughed while her head shook in mock dismay. She did far more for the twins than she should, but she couldn't help it. She loved those rug rats.

Nala chuckled, her pleasant voice carrying a husky tone that was a nice contrast to the annoying chirping of crickets and the sound of traffic flowing by. The record store was part of a short but popular strip mall. Some of the stores were still open, so though it was after 11pm a continuous line of headlights illuminated the road in front of the strip mall and the parking lot.

"You could have an excuse, if you had homework to do."

"Don't you start. That's why I don't want to go home."

"They on you again, about going back to Spelman?"

Rachele let the slam of the passenger side door answer the question. She walked around to the driver side and rested against the door panel. Nala opened the driver's side door of her car and slipped the key into the ignition, then tossed her bag inside onto the passenger seat. She closed the door again and leaned against it.

Rachele fought another pang of jealousy. It seemed to be all she was feeling, lately. Everyone else was living the life she wanted to be living, and not the one she was burdened with. Nala was an only

child, the daughter of Aunt Layla, her mother's sister. Layla was a nurse, and made good money, enough to support herself and Nala. Nala didn't have to share a bedroom with two other girls or a bathroom with four other siblings. Nala drove a cute little car, a little Mazda thing, and she looked cute in it. Nala didn't have to drive a mini van, shared among all the kids that could drive. During the school year it wasn't that big of a deal but in the summer, when her two older brothers were home from college, fighting for the van was a Nixon Family Past time-- they even kept score. It became a game of barter and trade, begging and pleading and even if you got to use the van, you had to cart around your brothers and sisters first. It made winning the van a lot less fun and more like the usual responsibility. Losing the van was nice, though. No car meant you didn't have to worry about picking anyone up.

"I don't know how many times, in how many ways I have to tell them I'm not going back. It's not what I want."

Nala picked at a perfectly manicured nail, bought with money she could spend on herself, instead of contributing to the household income. "You know that ain't gonna fly. Mama says Aunt Paula been talking about you going to college since you were born, practically. Robby's gone, Ronny's gone, and Reagan is going, in the fall. And you can bet the other four are going. Why you always got to be the rebel?"

"It's just not for me. I mean, they could let me go to Georgia State and get a music degree but..." Rachele crossed her arms, shivering in the cool breeze that snaked through the humid evening air, out of nowhere. Rain was coming. "It's like if I don't go HBCU, I didn't go to college. They're so uppity about it."

"They're not uppity," Nala argued, bristling. She was a Spelman sophomore after all, and a proud student at a Historically Black College or University. Spelman was Aunt Layla's dream for Nala, one she had no problem fulfilling it. "They just want you to go to a good school that you'll be proud to go to, where people will respect you when you say where you went."

"Please," Rachele sputtered, rolling her eyes. "White folks don't care nothin' about no HBCU. Nobody cares about HBCU's but my parents." Rachele's round, dark brown eyes lifted to her cousin's light brown, almond shaped ones. "And you. But you have a right to be proud. Making Dean's List and shit."

"Well..." Nala's chest puffed proudly and she fought to control a grin as it spread across her thick lips, shellacked with a berry tinted gloss, her light skin tone betraying a bit of a blush, even in the harsh outdoor lighting of the parking lot. "I wasn't gonna say nothin', but... I'm pretty damn smart. Yeah." She nodded, her hands on slim hips, long lashes waving as she batted them relentlessly.

"Obnoxious." Rachele pushed off of the van with a sigh and reached for the door latch. "I gotta go before Mama starts blowing up my phone. Say hi to your Mama for me and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Nuh uh, I'm off tomorrow. Wednesday, though."

"Wednesday it is," Rachele answered, climbing into the well worn, cloth seat of the van, watching Nala duck into her cute little car, check her short and sassy bob in the mirror and start up her car. She waved as Nala pulled away, then started the van and followed her out of the parking lot.

WBBT-FM crackled over the speakers, a popular song with a killer hook and catchy melody. Rachele caught herself singing along and, since she was alone, sang louder, enjoying the sound of her own voice.

*I sound good tonight, she thought to herself. Real good. I think I'll sing all the way home.*

She was still singing when she pulled into the driveway and then veered off to the right, underneath the carport. She turned off the rumbling huff of the engine, grabbed her backpack and hopped out, slamming the door shut and heading to the house. She never locked it-- there was nothing to steal and her parent's philosophy was that they'd rather live without a car stereo than replace a window. Priorities.

Lights were still burning inside the house-- a cozy 5 bedroom, split level that had never known a quiet day, even when most of the 8 children, 2 adults and one dog were gone. There was always a TV or a radio on somewhere, in someone's room or the spacious den, remodeled after the last of the Nixon clan was born. They had to have some place big enough for all of them to gather. Someone was always talking or screaming or crying or singing or playing an instrument or playing a game. The norm for the house was noise and even at 11:30pm, activity in the house was at its usual pace and decibel level.

Rachele opened the kitchen door, almost knocking over Rodney, one of the twins. At 12 years old, he was already taller than Rachele and had the nerve to be growing a thin layer of peach fuzz on his upper lip.

"What are you doing up?" She frowned at his casual glance at her. "You have school tomorrow."

"Daddy was checking my homework," he said, shoving a graham cracker square into his mouth and moving past her, his slippers slapping against the linoleum floor. "Going now."

"Are your clothes out?" Rachele called after him. "I'm ironing and going right to bed. I'm not playing."

Her mother's tired but gentle tone sounded from the dining room around the corner. "Their clothes are in the laundry room, Chelle."

Rachele and Paula Nixon could be twins, if you didn't look closely at them. Same height, same caramel skin tone, same head of kinky brown hair, same round, chocolate brown eyes with long lashes that curled up at the tip. Most of the Nixon girls looked like Paula, except for Reagan, who mysteriously looked more like Wayne than her mother, but Rachele was almost a mirror image. They liked to say the only thing Rachele got from her father was her voice, a rich alto, decadent and smooth, like Lauryn Hill. *But better*, Rachele secretly thought.

"Iron and ironing board are set up, all ready to go. Did you have any dinner?" Still dressed in the conservative slacks and blouse she had worn to work that day, Paula wearily wandered into the kitchen, reached for Rachele's backpack and the keys to the van and hung them, respectively, on the back of a chair and a hook next to the door. Rachele shook her head, the thick mass of curls shaking with it.

"I'm not hungry, just tired. Wish I could go to bed. Rodney and Raina need to learn how to iron."

"I know how to iron," piped in a young, female voice from the dining room table, on the other side of the wall.

"Finish! You need to get in the bed!" Paula's tone was sharp but her voice low, a combination that told her kids that she meant business and she was not playing. Raina, Rodney's twin, dragged homework out until the least possible second, especially math homework. A simple algebra worksheet would take her four hours to complete if someone didn't stay on her. Though she couldn't see Raina, Paula knew instinctively that her daughter's head was bowed and the pencil was once again moving quickly across the page. She shook her head and playfully rolled her eyes toward the dining room.

"Mama, you're up late," said Rachele, noting the redness in the corner of her mother's eyes, and the bags underneath. "Daddy, too. Go on to bed. Ya'll be grumpy in the morning, ordering me around. I'll make sure Raina and Rodney get to bed." Rachele gave her arm a pat and a knowing squeeze, then walked around the table that dominated the small kitchen, toward the laundry room at the back of the house. "Where's Reagan? Library?"

Paula yawned while answering. "Girl, it's after 11. Reagan's already in bed."

A spark licked at Rachele's eyes and before she could stop herself, she turned on her heel and stomped back toward the kitchen. "So, everybody's up doing things but Reagan? Raina needs help with her math homework, and there are wrinkled clothes in the laundry room. She shouldn't be going to bed when there are clothes to iron and younger ones still awake. Reagan can iron just like I can."

An eyebrow rose on Paula's face. Rachele was teetering on the edge of what the Nixons would tolerate as backtalk but there was no going back, now. "Reagan had after school duty with Russell and got dinner on the table and cleaned the kitchen afterward--"

Rachele scoffed, stepping closer to Paula. "A dinner I cooked before I went to work! All she had to do was put the dish in the oven and make some rolls. In a kitchen I cleaned this morning, mopped and everything--"

"Open your mouth to interrupt me one more time, Miss Rachele and see if I won't pop you in it." Paula's nose flared, a fist lodged on her hip, her cheeks taking on a pink hue as she huffed, panting as if she'd just run a flight of stairs. "We are *all* doing our part here in this house. When you quit Spelman, I told you that you were not going to be sitting around here eating Pop-tarts and watching *Days of Our Lives* while other people are going to work and going to school. Going to

school was your job. It was your part. And I told you before you dropped out that if you couldn't do that job, you could do another one, and that is to help take care of this family."

"Mama, I--" Rachelle hesitated, just in case her mom wasn't finished talking. Her voice shook with a barely controlled anger when she spoke again. "I'm just saying that I do a lot of work around here. More than any of the other kids, and I think I'm being punished because I don't want to sit in a class for four hours every day."

"Well, when you decided you were done with school, I guess you decided you were grown. You're not being punished, Rachelle. You're being treated like an adult." Paula stared at Rachelle, like she dared her to speak another word in protest. Hearing none, she inhaled a deep breath and stepped back. "Now, there are clothes to be ironed for tomorrow. Raina needs someone to check her math homework. And it is late, so as you suggested, I'm going to bed. We will see you in the morning."

Paula dropped a dry, airy kiss on her cheek and walked past her to the stairs, calling to her husband in his office on the second level. A few minutes later, their bedroom door closed and the noise level in the house lowered to a light hum. Rodney was still awake in the room he shared with the youngest Nixon, Russell. Rachelle could hear the audience laughter on the late night talk show. Raina tapped a pencil against a textbook, oblivious to the rhythm she was beating out against the page.

"Raina, hurry up and finish," Rachelle said, tipping her head around the corner. "I can't go to bed until you do."

"Almost done," she answered, without even looking up, pencil moving across the page slowly.

Rachelle trudged down the hall again, past the stairs, past Rodney and Russell's room, toward the laundry room. Toward more responsibility--making sure her siblings didn't go to school in wrinkled clothes.

Paula and Wayne Nixon had one thing in mind when they met--well, two things: get married and have children. Paula had always wanted a large family, as long as she could remember. When she met Wayne, she was still in college at Spelman. He attended nearby Morehouse College and they were nearly inseparable from the day they met. It was just understood that there would be a lot of children, a lot of laughter, a lot of noise.

Wayne didn't so much mind his brood-- it was just that five boys ate a lot of food. And it was expensive to send eight children to college. The two oldest sons, Robert and Ronald, 22 and 20, went to school on scholarships-- football, but their academics weren't too shabby. Reagan, 17, had been accepted at Spelman, where her older sister Rachelle had gone for a year, decided it wasn't for her, and dropped out. Renee, 15, twins Rodney and Raina, 12, and Russell, 10, had a few years before they had to think about college, but for Paula and Wayne it was just around the corner. Education and good grades had been stressed from birth. The Nixons were a smart bunch of kids-- anything less than a B was embarrassing, considering Paula and Wayne both taught high school.

*Why you always got to be the rebel?*

Nala's words came rushing back as Rachelle plugged in the iron and filled the reservoir with water for steam. She had always bit a little bit of a rebel, she had to admit. She was never a bad child; she just did things in her own way, in her own time, to her satisfaction. While she was smart and schoolwork came easily to her, she was bored in classes and often lagged behind her classmates until she was forced (with threats to pull her from music programs) into applying herself. The only classes she really excelled in, went above and beyond and truly enjoyed were music classes. Rachelle loved every choir that was ever formed-- Jazz Choir, Youth Choir, All City Choir, and the choir at Mt Olive Baptist, where she was a soloist. Singing was in her veins, in her DNA. Paula could belt a tune if you pushed her into it, but Wayne was the showboat of the family. He played all kinds of instruments—saxophone, piano, guitar, drums-- and sang so well he could bring an entire audience to its knees. Like Rachelle, he had dreamt once of making it big, taking his talent on the road to see where it led him, but Paula was against it. *There's nothing out there but trouble and heartache*, she'd say. *You're at your best here at home with your family.*

Then she'd stalk away, like there had actually been a conversation, and that would be that. Rachelle would watch his shoulders sag and sink into momentary sadness, and then he would perk up again, his lips forming a plastic, wan smile, and he would push on. She hated to see his dreams dismissed so summarily-- because if he couldn't live his dream, she couldn't live hers either.

And so this was life, everyday of it. In a big house, filled with children and love and encouragement, but only as long as everyone did what Mama and Daddy wanted them to do. Rachelle had to admit that it wasn't much to ask, for kids to get good grades, go to a good school, make something of themselves and make their parents proud. Really, she just wished that singing was something that would make them proud, and that writing a hit song would be considered making something of herself. Unfortunately it wasn't, and neither parent would hear of her wasting her days and nights with her notepad and pen, out on the back porch swing, dreaming. As Rachelle watched the steam press the wrinkles out of jeans and khaki pants and a short sleeved collared shirt and a cute t-shirt with some cartoon character etched into it, her mind wandered where it always wandered-- the secret dream, the secret wish. The secret plan.

*I'll show them*, she thought, as she hung the clothes, still warm from the iron, on hangers on the back of the laundry room door. *I'll show everyone. I'll show them that I can sing and my talent is good for more than a verse of 'Jesus Loves Me' before Reverend Cooper gives his sermon. I'll show them I can be a star.*