

MELODY

1964

No Ordinary Sound



Meet the Ellisons

🎵 CHAPTER 1 🎵

It was a perfect day in May, and Melody Ellison could hardly wait for her father to pull the car to a stop in front of her grandparents' house. Every Sunday, Melody and her family had dinner here after church. But today was different. Melody was almost bursting with news. She hopped out of the station wagon so quickly that she forgot to hold the door for her sister Lila, who was coming out behind her.

"Hey!" Lila shouted, but nine-year-old Melody was already on the front porch, peering into the front windows. She could hear music coming from inside, and couldn't help tapping her shiny shoes. Music always made her want to *move*.

"What are you so hot after?" asked Dwayne, Melody's older brother. His long legs had brought him around the car and up behind her in only a few steps.

"I'm not hot," Melody answered, before she realized that Dwayne was joking. He meant that she was excited, and she was. She couldn't hold in her news any longer.

"Miss Dorothy asked me to sing a solo for Youth Day,"

she said proudly. Youth Day was far away in October, but it was the biggest children's program at their church. Kids from all over the city came to sing, play music, recite poetry, and even perform in skits. Only a few kids got the chance to stand in front to sing solo parts, and they had to be very, very good.

Dwayne raised his eyebrows, and Melody watched his face nervously. It wasn't easy to impress him. Dwayne was eighteen, and he'd done his first solo when he was eight.

"Wow, congratulations!" he said. "You've gotta write Yvonne and tell her."

Melody grinned. Yvonne was their oldest sister, who was away at college. She was a good singer, too. In fact, all the members of Melody's family were musical. "I will," she promised. "As soon as we get home."

"Tell Yvonne what?" Lila joined them, carrying a plate with their mother's foil-wrapped triple-chocolate cake.

"Melody's going to be the star of the New Hope Baptist Church Youth Day," Dwayne said, grabbing the plate as it wobbled. "Just like I'm going to be the biggest Motown star since Smokey Robinson."

Lila sniffed matter-of-factly. "Dee-Dee might beat you to it." Lila was thirteen and sometimes acted like she knew everything in the world.

"Not me." Melody shook her head. She liked to pretend

she was a singing star at home, using her hairbrush as a microphone. But she didn't like to be in the spotlight. She felt safe in the children's choir when the congregation was full of the church family she'd known all her life. But she was nervous about standing alone on Youth Day, in front of a big crowd full of faces she didn't know.

Melody's parents crowded onto the porch as Big Momma swung open the door. Melody had always thought it was funny that they called her grandmother Big Momma, since she wasn't especially tall. But the name was a sign of respect. Besides, when her grandmother sang, her voice was very big.

"Hello, my chicks!" Big Momma said, waving everyone inside. She greeted each of her grandchildren with a rose-scented squeeze.

"Big Momma, this is Detroit, Michigan. You left all your chickens back in Alabama, remember?" Dwayne said, ducking out of her arms.

After giving Melody a hug, Big Momma folded her arms and gave her a stern look. "I believe you've got something to tell me," she said.

"Yes!" Melody exclaimed. "Miss Dorothy asked me to learn a solo over the summer for the Youth Day pro—" She stopped. Big Momma was smiling and nodding. "You already knew!" Melody said. "How?"

"Big Momma and Miss Dorothy are best friends," Lila said. "They tell each other everything."

Big Momma laughed. "Yes, Dorothy and I trained to be music teachers together back in Alabama. She says you're ready to carry a song on your own."

"Who is ready for what?" Melody's mother asked from the dining room.

"Melody's doing a Youth Day solo," Lila told her.

"Oh, that's wonderful, honey!" Mrs. Ellison clapped her hands and rushed to give Melody a hug.

"I believe our Melody is ready to sing out," Mr. Ellison said as he placed extra chairs at the dining table. Melody heard the pride in her father's voice and wished she felt as confident as he did.

Big Momma put her arm around Melody's shoulders. "It's okay to be nervous, baby chick," she said, reading Melody's mind. "You have all summer to practice. I'll help."

"But what about your students?" Melody asked. Big Momma taught piano and voice lessons to kids and grown-ups, right in her living room.

"Don't worry, I'll find the time."

"Thanks, Big Momma." Melody felt her nerves flutter again. But she felt good knowing that her family believed in her so much. She skipped into the dining room to join Lila, Dwayne, and their parents at the table.

Melody sat next to Mommy and looked at Dwayne, who was at the other end of the table. "The thing about Youth Day is that I get to pick my own song," Melody told her brother. "But I don't know which one to sing."

"We could try some songs after dinner." Dwayne winked at Melody. She knew he took every chance he could to play Big Momma's beloved piano.

"*After* dinner means we need to *eat* dinner first, doesn't it?" Melody's father said.

"But we can't start without Poppa," Dwayne said.

Where was her grandfather, anyway, Melody wondered. Before she could ask, she heard the back door of the house open and shut.

"Hello!" Poppa's voice boomed. Poppa always talked loud. Melody's mother said it was because of his work around all the loud machines years ago at the auto factory. Melody liked the sound—it reminded her of drumbeats.

"Guess who I brought to dinner!" Poppa called from the kitchen.

Everyone turned in his direction. He opened the door, and there stood Yvonne with a huge smile on her face.

"Vonnie!" Melody ran around the table to give her big sister a hug.

"What a surprise!" Mrs. Ellison said. "We didn't expect you till next week." Melody could tell that her mother was

very happy. Yvonne had been gone since January.

"I took all my exams and I finished my last paper early, so I caught the bus," Yvonne explained. "Poppa picked me up at the Detroit terminal. Boy, that ride from Alabama takes forever!" She barely took a breath before dropping her bag and greeting everyone. "Wow, Dee-Dee. Did you get taller? Got any new sounds, Dwayne? Lila, are those new glasses? Dad, you're wearing the birthday shirt we gave you! Big Momma, that roast smells really good. And Mommy, I know you made your triple-chocolate cake. Can we eat?"

Melody laughed. College hadn't changed Yvonne's habit of talking a mile a minute.

Big Momma brought the roast in and everyone took their places around the table, with Poppa at one end and Daddy at the other. And now the family was truly all together, the way their Sundays used to be.

"Dee-Dee, why don't you sing grace for us?" her father said.

"Yes, Daddy," Melody said. She felt comfortable singing in front of *this* crowd. She bowed her head and sang in a strong, clear voice:

*By Thy hands must we be fed;
Give us, Lord, our daily bread.*

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