

Melody of Life

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*To my writers' group, Foothills Inkspires.
Your friendship and encouragement mean so much to me*

CHAPTER ONE

*M*ark Chambers knocked on the open door of Dave Wilkes's office and entered. "Good morning, Dave. You wanted to see me?"

Mark settled into the chair facing Dave, who looked up from his chair on the other side of his desk. Dave nodded. "Yes. Good morning, Mark."

For all the time they'd worked together, Mark had been on good terms with his boss. Now, the tight lines around Dave's mouth and the crease between his eyes worried Mark. His gut tightened. What troubled Dave?

Two weeks ago, Dave informed Mark he'd recommended Mark to supervise the development of projects in a new southern district office in Tennessee that Building and Engineering Concepts, the BEC, planned to open. A major increase in pay and benefits went along with the greater responsibilities.

He'd accept the new position if offered. Although it would be hard to leave Millvale, his hometown, moving to Tennessee might be just what he needed to get a fresh start at this point in his life.

Dave folded his hands on his desk. “How are things in Millvale?” Dave always showed an interest in his employees’ lives.

“About the same as usual.”

“Did you have any trouble on your trip in today?”

Mark tensed. Dave’s troubled expression hadn’t changed, and now he appeared to be stalling for time. Why didn’t he say what he had to say?

“Traffic was heavy, and I had to stop twice for road construction, but the trip was otherwise uneventful. The forecasted storm held off.” He took a deep breath to relax.

“Glad to hear it.” Dave tapped his desk and cleared his throat. “I called you in here, because there’s been a change of plans. Last week, the Board of Directors took a merger vote. Maxwell Corporation took over Building and Engineering Concepts. We’ll be closing our headquarters here and moving out of state.”

What? He leaned forward. “I—I didn’t know a merger was being considered.”

“Yes, for a while now. I thought we’d decided to expand on our own, but the Board made a turnabout and went along with the merger.”

Mark tried to wrap his mind around the implications. “What does this mean?”

“I’m sorry. I’ll have to take back the offer for you to manage the new office.” Dave sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Maxwell Corporation will lay off most of our people.” He dropped his eyes to his desk and shuffled some papers. “You’ll get a good severance package and help finding a new placement.”

“But I’ve been with the company for eight years. You’ve been satisfied with my work and that of my team. We’ve helped build this company.”

“I know, and I’m sorry to do this to you.” Dave finally looked up. “I have no complaints about your work, but the Maxwell Corporation owns a controlling interest in the new

company and wants to make decisions about its employees. You may apply for a position with them. I'll write you an excellent recommendation."

Mark took a couple of deep breaths to refill his lungs. Instead of a promotion, he'd get a severance package. How did this happen?

On top of everything else, a job loss. Why, God?

"Your team will finish work on your present project with your meeting next week. You've done a great job with the senior citizens' complex. You're right on schedule."

Mark nodded. His team had already begun preliminary work on their next project, which would either be scrapped or passed on to Maxwell. How would the members of his team afford to live? Autumn had a baby due in six months. Ian's wife needed chemo for breast cancer. The others on his team had children.

"Please don't talk about this with your co-workers until I've had the opportunity to speak with everyone here today."

"I won't." Mark stood, his legs like jelly, his chest tight. He wanted to say he understood and didn't take it personally. But it was personal. Life-changing. "I'm shocked. However, I want you to know I've enjoyed working for BEC and with you." Mark held out his hand.

Dave also stood and clasped Mark's hand. "Thank you. I wish this could have had a different ending. It's out of my control and I'm sorry."

"Me too." With trembling hands, Mark lifted his briefcase and walked out of Dave's office. He still had a project to complete. A glance at his watch indicated he had forty-five minutes before meeting with his team. He rode the elevator to the café on the first floor of the BEC building. A cup of coffee might calm and prepare him for what lay ahead.

Unlike most of his co-workers, he no longer had a family to support. Rachael's autoimmune disease and vulnerability to respiratory illness left him a widower five years ago. Fourteen

months ago, his daughter, Blythe, had joined her mother in heaven. If he could have them back, he'd willingly give up everything, including his job. But he was alone, and now he was jobless.

His brother, Jack, had been excited when Mark told him about the new job offer with BEC, and it would be hard telling him he'd be unemployed in another week. Outdoors, lightning flashed, and rain splashed against the windows. The weatherman that morning predicted the storm, but nothing had prepared Mark for the news that caused the turmoil now swirling within him.

How would he make it through the next couple of days?