

MELODY

1964

Never Stop
Singing



Melody's Eve

🎵 CHAPTER 1 🎵



Melody Ellison stared for a moment at the bright new calendar in her hands before she put it up on the kitchen wall. The picture on the January page showed a tall evergreen tree, its thick branches frosted with snow.

"O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, how lovely are your branches," Melody sang, even though Christmas had been over for a week. It was New Year's Eve, and tomorrow would be the first day of 1964, her tenth birthday!

Melody loved the idea that having a New Year's birthday meant that the whole world was having a birthday, too. Until now she'd been too young to stay awake past midnight, or to attend the special Watch Night service at their church. Now that she was turning ten, her parents had decided that she was old enough to do both.

Melody's sister Lila came into the kitchen with Bo, the family's mixed terrier. Lila playfully tugged at one of Melody's braids. "Dee-Dee's almost double digits!"

"That's right!" Melody said proudly. Lila was already thirteen, and Melody felt as if she was finally catching up.

"Good morning, Melody," her mother said, joining the

girls in the kitchen. "I see you're carrying on your calendar-changing tradition!"

"Yes, I am, Mommy," Melody said, watching her mother tie on a colorful apron. "And if I weren't going to help Poppa decorate the church hall for tonight, I'd help you and Lila make the cake."

"Hey! You can't help make your own birthday cake!" Lila said, taking eggs out of the refrigerator.

Mommy shook her head as she took the large mixing bowl out of the cupboard. "My baby girl is going to be ten tomorrow! Seems like it was just yesterday that you were born."

"Mommy, I'm not a baby anymore," Melody reminded her, skipping out to the living room. "I'm about to become double digits, remember?"

Melody glanced at the sunburst clock over the sofa. Her grandparents, Poppa and Big Momma, wouldn't be arriving for another half hour. So Melody turned on the TV and waited while it warmed up. When the picture appeared, she turned the knob through all the channels, looking for something fun to watch. But every station seemed to be running a program that looked back on the year's news. Melody didn't really want to be reminded. She reached for the knob to shut off the TV.

"Wait, Dee-Dee!" Melody's other sister, Yvonne, called out from the stairs. "Don't turn it off. I want to watch."

Yvonne was home from college for the holidays, and Melody was glad to have her back for a few weeks. Now, if only their brother, Dwayne, were here! This was the first Christmas he'd ever been away, and Melody really missed him. He and his singing group, The Three Ravens, were traveling around the country singing for Motown, the famous record company. Dwayne was a talented musician, but Daddy didn't like his new career one bit. Dwayne was only eighteen, and Daddy and Mommy wanted him to go to college instead.

Melody and Yvonne sat on the sofa and watched a grainy replay of the new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, being sworn into office back in November.

Yvonne shook her head. "I still can't believe somebody killed the president of the United States," she said, turning up the sound. They listened as the grim-faced newscaster told the whole story again: how President John F. Kennedy and the First Lady were in a motorcade in Dallas, Texas, on November 22. They were riding in the back of a Lincoln Continental convertible when a man with a gun fired at them and assassinated the president.

"The country remains in shock as our new president faces a grieving nation, problems overseas, and growing civil rights protests here at home," said the newscaster. Then he began to talk about the bombing of a Birmingham, Alabama, church that had killed four little girls. Melody turned away

from the TV screen. Somebody who wanted to frighten black people away from fighting for equal rights had set off the bomb on a Sunday morning in September.

Although it had happened hundreds of miles away from Detroit, Melody had been frightened—so much so that she'd lost her voice right before the big Youth Day concert at church. For a long while she'd been afraid to go inside her own church. Her family and friends had helped her find courage, and her voice, again, but the thought of the bombing still scared Melody.

"I'll never forget that day," Yvonne said, interrupting Melody's memories.

Yvonne had been away at Tuskegee, her college, when the bombing had happened. Tuskegee was also in Alabama—only a few hours' drive from Birmingham. "Vonnie," Melody suddenly asked, "were *you* scared?" Melody had never considered that her brave big sister might have been frightened, too.

"Yes, at first," Yvonne said. "I had signed up to go to Birmingham the very next weekend. We were going to sit at a lunch counter to protest the fact that the place refused to serve black people. But after that Sunday I wasn't sure if I should go."

Melody got up, turned the TV off, and turned back to her sister. "But you did go to Birmingham, didn't you?"

Yvonne nodded. "I remembered Mom telling me that I

should always stand up to wrong. Bombing that church was wrong. Treating black people unfairly is wrong. So I decided that I had to go to Birmingham and support what I believe in, you know?"

Melody nodded. "Big Momma told me something like that, too! She said we should keep our hearts and voices strong when bad things happen. I tried really hard to be strong for the little girls in Birmingham. I *wanted* to be, only I wasn't sure I could."

Yvonne got up and gave Melody a hug. "You didn't let fear turn you around," she said. "You went back to church to sing. You *were* strong."

Melody didn't say anything. She just leaned into her sister's hug.

Just then there was a knock on the front door. Yvonne answered it, and their grandfather came in, along with a blast of cold air.

"Happy Melody's Eve, everybody!" Poppa's voice boomed. It was his joke to call New Year's Eve "Melody's Eve." Melody hurried to give him a hug.

"Are you ready to be my helper in getting the church decorated for tonight?" Poppa asked.

"Of course," Melody answered, grabbing her jacket. "Bye, Yvonne. Bye, Mommy," she called.

"Good-bye," Mommy called back. "Go make our New Hope church beautiful for tonight."

Poppa's truck was in the driveway. The words "Frank's Flowers" were on the passenger door. Poppa owned a flower shop on 12th Street, and he had taught Melody everything she knew about plants and gardening.

"Are you excited about your first Watch Night service?" Poppa asked as they climbed into the truck. "You know it's a tradition for many colored folks, especially those of us with family in the South."

Melody knew from her brother and sisters that Watch Night wouldn't exactly be a New Year's Eve party like the ones that were on TV. But there would be singing, and preaching by Pastor Daniels, with food and fellowship afterward in the church hall.

"I'm glad I can finally stay up with everybody else till midnight," she told him. "But why is it called 'Watch Night'?"

"It goes back one hundred years," Poppa explained, "to when word got out that President Abraham Lincoln planned to announce to the country that all slaves were free. The president was going to make the announcement on New Year's Day, 1863. So colored people, slave and free, sat up all night, keeping watch for freedom—Watch Night."

"But you can't *see* freedom," Melody said.

"Are you sure about that?" Poppa asked.

Melody wondered for a moment what freedom might look like. Would it look like the thousands of people who had marched in Washington, D.C., last August? Yvonne had

gone to that march, and Melody and her family had watched it on TV.

"Would freedom look like people of all races doing things together?" she asked.

"Maybe," Poppa said. "Back in 1863, *that* kind of freedom was just a dream."

Melody nodded. She thought about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who spoke at the march in Washington. He talked about his dream.

"I think on that first Watch Night, they could see freedom coming," Poppa went on. "How many times have you tried to stay awake on Melody's Eve, because what's coming is so special? When you're expecting something big, something wonderful to happen, you can't rest. And when that Emancipation Proclamation did come, our people celebrated. We've been giving thanks ever since, during Watch Night."

Melody smiled. She was thankful that she was finally going to stay up for Watch Night. And she was proud that her birthday was linked to such an important tradition.

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[Return to Table of Contents](#)