

MELODY CARLSON

— A NOVEL —

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AS  
WE FEEL



AS YOUNG AS  
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MELODY  
CARLSON



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== B O O K O N E ==

M E L O D Y C A R L S O N

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====Chapter 1====

MARLEY PHELPS

Marley had hoped that her former high-school friends might've grown up by their thirty-fifth reunion. Unfortunately she was disappointed. Oh, most of them had matured somewhat, at least externally. She observed more bald heads, wrinkles, and gray hair than she recalled from their last gathering, and she was relieved to see that many had let go of old cliques and social boundaries. But others, like Keith Arnold, were still jerks. That surprised her, since rumor was he'd done time for embezzlement. Marley figured that alone would've knocked the former football jock down a peg or two, but once he'd poured a few Kamikazes into that paunch belly of his, he started acting like he was still the king of Clifden.

"It can't be!" he said loudly as a heavyset woman entered the room. "Are you really Abby Franklin? The cute little cheerleader I used to hoist over my shoulder?"

Abby did appear to have put on some weight since high school, but Marley wondered who hadn't. Still, Abby looked uneasy as she glanced around the crowded lounge as if she wanted to make a fast break. And who could blame her?

"Hey, Abby." Marley moved between Abby and Keith the Jerk. "It's so good to see you again. You're still living in town, right? How's it going?"

"Pretty good." Relief washed over Abby's face.

"Don't mind that big baboon," Marley said quietly. "He's been doing his best to offend everyone."

"I almost didn't come."

"I'm glad you did." Marley nodded over to where Keith was ordering another drink from the bar. "I've observed that Keith has a pattern. He either insults you or ignores you. He hasn't said a word to me. But since you were part of his crowd, he must've felt the need to include you in some good old public humiliation."

"I feel so honored." At the bar Keith and a couple of guys were gathered around a tall, attractive blonde. "Is that Caroline McCann?"

"The life of the party, as usual."

"I swear that woman *never* ages. She doesn't look a day over thirty."

"A lot of us look good from a distance."

"Does she look worse close up?" Abby almost sounded too eager.

Marley laughed. "Not really. Oh, a little older perhaps, but she's still gorgeous."

Abby eyed Marley now. "You're not looking bad yourself. I like your hair."

"Why thank—"

"*Abby Franklin!*" cried Caroline as she recognized her old friend.

"Get yourself over here, girlfriend!"

"Oh dear!" Abby grabbed Marley's arm. "I don't know if I can do this."

“Sure you can,” Marley assured her. “Just be yourself and let the good times roll.”

Marley felt mildly surprised that she’d actually had a conversation with Abby. They’d been friends once, long ago, back in grade school. But then Abby got popular and turned into a somewhat stuck-up cheerleader, whereas Marley had always considered herself to be more of a free spirit—at least back then. How times and people had changed!

“I don’t envy *her*,” commented a classmate that Marley barely remembered. The slender woman nodded toward Abby, who was now socializing with the lovely Caroline and obnoxious Keith.

“I’ll bet you used to,” Marley teased.

She snickered. “Maybe so. It’s funny how the tables turn after high school. I just saw Brenda Jones in the bathroom, and let me tell you, that woman won’t need to use her AARP card for ID. It’s written all over her face. I suppose it’s nature’s way of leveling the playing field.”

“But underneath our older exteriors, we’re the same people,” Marley pointed out.

“Except that some of our exteriors just look better.”

“Right.” Marley couldn’t recall this woman’s name, and the light was too dim to read her name tag, but since she’d made so many catty remarks, Marley mentally named her Cat Woman. Cat Woman continued to make her witty observations, sparing no one. As Marley was trying to think of a graceful way to escape her, another woman joined them. It took Marley a moment to recognize her old friend, but then Joanna hugged her, and they exchanged greetings.

“It’s been so long,” Joanna said.

"It's hard to believe it's been thirty-five years." Marley shook her head. "Honestly I just don't feel that old."

"I do." Joanna made a weak smile.

"Some of our friends are a lot older than at our last reunion." Cat Woman directed this observation to Joanna. "In fact I think the last five years must've been hard on certain people."

"While others like Caroline McCann"—Joanna sighed in a tired way—"look as good as ever."

"Can you believe we're older than the president of the United States?" Cat Woman took a sip of her margarita.

"We need to quit focusing on age." Marley stood a bit straighter. "Really, what difference does it make? Aren't we as young as we feel?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm feeling about eighty at the moment." Joanna pointed to her feet. "And these shoes are killing me."

"Take them off," suggested Marley.

"If I take them off I might not be able to get them back on again." Joanna frowned. "Ever since I entered menopause, I've had a horrible time with everything from hot flashes to night sweats to water retention."

Marley looked at Joanna's puffy feet and nodded with sympathy.

"Why don't you go sit down?" Cat Woman suggested.

Marley suspected that Cat Woman didn't care to be seen with Joanna. There was no denying that Joanna had changed a lot. Marley found it difficult to believe that this woman with the frowsy gray hair and bad pantsuit had actually been hip at one time. Marley could still remember how the two of them used to hang out in the art department, sometimes sneaking around back to smoke a joint

when Mr. Monroe was distracted.

“I think I will sit down and put my feet up.”

“And I think I’ll get another drink,” Cat Woman said.

“And I’d like to mingle a bit,” Marley added. Not that she needed anyone’s permission. Still, she felt a sliver of guilt for not joining her old friend as Joanna sat on the sidelines of The Cliffs Hotel lounge. But it seemed obvious that Joanna was not enjoying herself, and Marley had come here with the intention of having some fun. In fact she was overdue for some good times.

“Hey, it’s Hippie Girl,” said Caroline McCann after Marley squeezed in next to her to order a cabernet.

Marley forced a smile. “And it’s Cheerleader Girl.”

Caroline laughed. “Dang, I forgot my pom-poms again.”

Marley realized she was starting to act like Cat Woman now and decided to nip it in the bud. “Caroline McCann,” she exclaimed, “I just have to say, you look amazing. You haven’t aged a day since our last reunion. What’s your secret?”

Naturally Caroline beamed at the compliment. “Why, thank you, Marley. I guess it’s just good genes. But I could say the same thing about you.”

“You could.” Marley chuckled. “If you were a liar.”

“No, you really *do* look good. And youthful too. And you’ve changed your hair.” Caroline reached over and touched Marley’s spiky brown hair and giggled. “It’s so short, it must be easy to care for.”

Keith leaned into the conversation. “Watch out, Marley, you might be mistaken for butch.” He laughed like he thought that was funny.

Marley just rolled her eyes.



But Caroline punched him in the arm. "And if Marley was butch, what's it to you anyway?"

"Then I'd just have to say you girls make an interesting couple." Keith draped his arm around Caroline's shoulders as he gave Marley the once-over. "But hey, I don't recall you girls being friends in high school."

"In case you haven't noticed, we're not in high school anymore," Marley pointed out.

"I know that. But didn't you used to hang out with that artsy-fartsy crowd?" he said to Marley. "Kind of the dippy-hippie bunch?"

Marley ignored him as she paid the bartender for her wine. Why bother to engage?

"For your information," Caroline told him, "Marley and I have been friends since we were in first grade."

"Well, sort of on-and-off friends," Marley clarified.

"Do you remember the Four Lindas?" Caroline exclaimed suddenly. Marley laughed. "Our secret club."

"Huh?" Keith looked confused now.

"It's a secret," Caroline said in an almost-seductive voice. "If we told you, we'd have to kill you."

"So why don't you kill me on the dance floor, baby doll?" Before Caroline could answer, he pulled her out to where several couples were dancing to oldies from the seventies. Marley watched for a bit, then turned to see Abby Franklin making her way toward her.

"Well, we've all survived Keith," Marley said.

"Unfortunately what he said is true." Abby patted her rounded hips. "I have put on a few pounds since our last reunion. Not that I need Keith to remind me."

"And not that he has room to talk," Marley told her.

"But I had been doing Jenny Craig back then, and I stayed busy with my garden and walking. Now it seems I sit around too much, and I probably enjoy my own cooking a little too much too."

"So you like to cook?" Marley couldn't even remember the last time she'd turned on her oven or enjoyed a home-cooked meal.

"I really do." Abby nodded, then smiled. "I have to tell you, Marley, you're looking good."

Marley nodded toward the dance floor. "Not as good as Caroline McCann. Can you believe her?" Caroline looked as limber as ever as she moved on the dance floor. Her pale blue dress must've had some beads or sequins on it, because it sparkled from the lights bouncing off the disco mirror ball. She really did look like Hollywood.

"No one looks as good as Caroline. And Paul can't take his eyes off of her."

"You're still married to Paul?" Marley remembered how shocked she'd been when Abby and Paul married right after high-school graduation. For some reason she'd always assumed it wouldn't last. Not that she was much of an expert on such things.

"Thirty-five years in June."

"Wow. Congratulations."

Abby just shrugged. "How about you?"

Marley was tempted to lie, but then wondered, *Why bother?* "John and I divorced about four years ago."

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be." Marley held her head high. "It was for the best."

"Well, it hasn't always been easy for Paul and me either. But

we've weathered the storms, and I'm pretty sure we'll be growing old together. At least I hope so."

"Is that him dancing with the class prez out there?" Marley asked.

"Yes, and it's my fault." She laughed. "I told Paul I needed a break, and I grabbed Cathy Gardener to take my place."

"Does Cathy still live in Clifden too?"

"Yes. She's been the city manager for more than ten years now, and she's really quite good at it."

"She always was a great diplomat."

Abby nodded. "Class president, valedictorian, girl most likely to succeed. She's sure lived up to the predictions. How about you, Marley? Do you still do your art?"

"Not like I wish. After the divorce I had to get a nine-to-five job. But at least I work in a gallery. Now instead of making art, I just sell it."

"That sounds like a fun job. Sometimes I think about working outside of my home, but then I consider all that I'd miss: cooking, sewing, gardening. And I just can't bring myself to do it." She frowned slightly as she watched the dance floor. Marley followed her gaze, observing that the current song was a slow one. Abby's husband had switched partners and was now dancing with the lovely Caroline.

"So is Caroline still doing the actress thing?" Marley asked.

Abby turned back to Marley. "She told me she hasn't had any good roles for a while, but she still seems to be happy down there in LA. I can't imagine it myself. I sometimes watch reruns of that reality series, the one with the housewives. And when I see the shows set in Orange County, I cannot believe what a rat race it must be down

there. Everyone is so focused on looks and being skinny and rich. I swear I wouldn't last a week."

"So how about Clifden?" ventured Marley. "I assume you still live here?"

"Oh, yes. We finished our new house a couple years ago. It's in North Beach—a new community that Paul developed."

"Ocean view?"

Abby nodded. "And beach access, too. It's quite lovely."

"And you're still happy to be living in Clifden?"

"Honestly there's no place I'd rather be."

"I noticed that town has some new shops."

"Yes. They come and go." Abby nodded at a tall redheaded woman who was just entering the room. "Isn't that Janie Sorenson?"

Marley studied the elegant-looking woman dressed in a light-colored two-piece suit. "I think so. I still can't get over how much she's changed since high school. Can you believe it?"

Abby nodded. "I remember that frizzy red hair and braces, and bad skin. Poor thing. I used to try to be friendly to her, but she was so shy, I could hardly get her to speak."

"Except when it came to speech class and debates," Marley reminded her. "That's when the real Janie came out."

Abby waved to Janie. "Paul told me she's a partner in a big New York law firm. Who would've thought?"

"How we've all changed."

Janie joined them. "Have I missed anything interesting?" she asked in a way that suggested she didn't really care.

"Not really," Abby told her. "Did you fly from New York today?"

Janie nodded with tired eyes. "I left Kennedy at seven this

morning, then got stuck in Denver for nearly three hours. I almost decided to just spend the night in Portland, but then, here I am." She frowned. "Although I'm not sure why exactly. I really wasn't friends with these kids."

"I'm glad you came," Marley told her. "It does everyone good to see how people can change."

Janie brightened slightly. "Yes. I suppose you're right."

"I was sorry to hear about your parents," Abby said gently.

"What happened to your parents?" asked Marley.

"Mom passed away last February, and Dad followed her in July. I'm still working out the details of their estate."

"I'm sorry." Marley put her hand on Janie's arm. "My parents both passed away about five years ago, within two months of each other."

"It's kind of sweet, isn't it?" Abby sighed. "To love someone so much that you don't want to stick around after the other one is gone. I think Paul and I might be like that."

Janie took in a quick breath and seemed on the verge of tears.

"Are you okay?" Marley asked quietly.

"I'm sorry," Abby said. "Was it something I said? I'm always sticking—"

"No, no, it's okay." Janie retrieved a handkerchief from a sleek brown bag that Marley suspected was terribly expensive. "It's just that I lost my husband, too." She dabbed her nose.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Abby put an arm around her.

"How long has it been?" Marley asked with concern.

"He passed on about six months before my parents started going downhill."

“Wow, you’ve had a hard couple of years,” Marley said. “Are you holding up okay?”

“Not at the moment.” Janie glanced around uncomfortably. “But it might have to do with being back here. And I’m tired. I think I’ll visit the ladies’ room to freshen up, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Poor Janie,” Abby said after she was gone. “Seems she’s had it rough.”

“Did you notice how thin she is?”

Abby nodded. “And those dark shadows beneath her eyes.”

“I hope she’s not having health problems.”

“I shouldn’t have said that bit about couples dying together.” Abby shook her head. “Sometimes I just don’t think before I—”

*“Is there a doctor in the house?”* someone hollered from the dance floor.

“Call 9-1-1!” yelled someone else. “We need an ambulance!”

Abby and Marley both rushed over to see what was wrong. There on the dance floor was Cathy Gardener, eyes closed and motionless. Paul and a couple of others hunched over her, trying to help.

“Let me in!” demanded the bartender. “Everyone back up and give the lady some room to breathe!” The young man pushed his way to Cathy’s side and, like a pro, immediately began to administer CPR.

“Come on,” the bartender said between breaths and counts. “Come on!”

“It looks like he knows what he’s doing,” Abby said quietly.

“Thank God for that,” Caroline said.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” Marley stared down at the lifeless

woman in the pinstriped dress, noticing that one of her shoes, a sensible navy pump, was missing.

“Let’s pray for Cathy,” Caroline said.

“Yes,” agreed someone else.

Just like that, several of them bowed their heads and actually began to pray out loud, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. Marley stood among them, but praying was not her specialty. So she tried to send positive thoughts and good karma in Cathy’s direction. Before long she could hear sirens approaching the hotel, and then the paramedics burst into the lounge and took over.

“Everyone back off,” the bartender commanded the crowd. “Give the medics room to work.”

By now the house lights were on, the music had stopped, and everyone stood at the sidelines. Quietly they huddled into small groups. Some continued to pray. Others simply watched with helpless expressions, and a few talked in worried whispers.

Janie came over to stand with Marley, Abby, and Caroline. “Did you see what happened?” she asked quietly.

“She just collapsed,” Caroline explained. “One moment she was dancing with Keith, and then she just went down.”

“Do you think it’s her heart?” Janie asked.

“I don’t know,” Caroline said sadly. “Although she had a pained expression in her face.”

“I’ve never heard of her having any kind of medical problems before,” Abby told them. “She’s always been such an active, energetic person. I’m sure she’ll pull through.”

“I wonder if she has family or anyone who should be notified.”

Janie glanced around the crowd. "Is she with someone tonight? Her husband perhaps?"

"She's single," Abby explained. "She was married for a few years, but that was a long time ago. And I know she doesn't have kids. From what I've heard, she's always been married to her job."

The paramedics had Cathy connected to machines now. With grim expressions, they lifted her onto the gurney, quickly adjusting the medical equipment and taping various tubes as they secured her for the trip to the hospital. But as they worked, Cathy's face remained pale and her body lifeless. Marley thought the circumstances really did not look hopeful. The entire lounge grew quiet as everyone helplessly watched their former class president being wheeled out.

After she was gone, the Clifden High School Class of 1973 looked at each other with expressions of shock and confusion. For some reason Marley thought everyone suddenly seemed strangely out of place in the starkly lit lounge. It was hard to imagine that just twenty minutes ago, they were laughing and joking. A few people moved to the door, gathering purses and coats as if preparing to leave. Others didn't seem to know what to do, but everyone seemed equally uncomfortable. It was clear: The party was over.