

# Anything but Normal

A Novel

Melody Carlson



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# 1

“Whaddya think, Sophie?” Carrie Anne stepped out of the fitting room and performed a quick 360-degree turn. She patted the backside of the slim-fitting jeans and then frowned. “Do these make my trunk look big?”

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right. Your trunk belongs on a Matchbox car”—she turned her own rear end toward her best friend—“whereas mine is more like the back end of a Club Cab.”

Carrie Anne laughed. “Hey, lots of guys appreciate a little junk in the trunk.”

“Enough with the car metaphors.” Sophie stared at her own image in the three-way mirror and groaned. “This is so useless. And these jeans are the worst ones yet. Seriously, I give up.”

“It’s just that the pockets are all wrong.” Carrie Anne pointed to Sophie’s behind. “See, they should be lower down and set farther apart—it’s just a bad design.”

“Or maybe I’m just a bad design.”

Carrie Anne gave Sophie a stern look. “Okay, now you’re insulting the designer.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. Besides, it’s not God’s fault that I’m fat. I mean, I wasn’t born fat.”

“You’re *not* fat, Sophie.”

“Uh-huh.” Sophie turned away. Carrie Anne’s definition of “fat” was pretty subjective, not to mention contradictory. She’d try to convince Sophie that she wasn’t overweight, but if her own waist developed the slightest muffin top over a pair of size 2 jeans, she had no problem saying, “Oh, man, I’m such a porker. I need to lose ten pounds.” And then Carrie Anne would launch into the latest, greatest lose-weight-fast tips—kind of like “hint hint.”

“You’re just *curvy*.” Carrie Anne continued with her passive-aggressive routine. Really, Sophie was used to this stuff, so why let it get to her now?

“Yeah, whatever.” Sophie reached for the door as the lump in her throat grew larger.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Right.” Sophie went into the dressing room and locked the door behind her. Tears were sneaking out and trickling down her flushed face. What was wrong with her? When had she turned into such a wimp?

“Why don’t you let me pick out another pair for you?” Carrie Anne called out. “I saw some jeans that—”

“That’s okay.” Sophie pulled up the bottom of her baggy Gap shirt, using the hem to dry her cheeks. Of course, this simply

revealed the overly plump muffin top that was pouring over the waist of her too-small jeans. "I think I've tried on enough clothes for today, Carrie."

"But school starts on Tuesday."

"And your point is?" Sophie popped open the button and released the zipper, allowing her tummy to spill out and her lungs to inhale properly. Seriously, overly tight jeans had to be hazardous to one's health. Manufacturers should be forced to put a warning label on them.

"What are you going to wear next week?"

"The same things I'm wearing this week."

Carrie Anne didn't respond.

"Don't worry." Sophie tried to insert some cheer into her voice. "I'll try not to look like a bag lady." She peeled off the detestable pants, then stared blankly into the full-length mirror in front of her. Some of her friends thought she looked like Drew Barrymore. But today Sophie thought she looked . . . well, generally unimpressive. Her honey-colored, shoulder-length hair was pulled back into a sloppy ponytail. Her greenish blue eyes, one of her better features, looked swollen and red. And her turned-up nose, also red, was dripping. She used the hem of her shirt again. Really, she should listen to her mom and start carrying tissues in her purse.

Sophie stood up straight, taking in another deep breath. This was so out of character for her. So perfectly ridiculous. She really needed to pull herself together. Sure, she was pleasantly plump. But good grief, that was nothing new. She'd begun

developing curves way back in fifth grade. That had been torturous enough back then—her peers had still looked like spindly colts while she'd felt like a clumsy cow. But now that she was seventeen and a senior, her friends had finally caught up. Or nearly. Carrie Anne's bra size was still a teeny-weeny 32AA. And even though she claimed it was 34A, Sophie knew better because she had recently seen one of Carrie Anne's bras on top of a laundry basket and checked it.

Sophie squared her shoulders and decided to take a more positive inventory of her appearance. Seriously, it was time to count her blessings, to be thankful for how God had made her. For one thing, she was able to walk, and her mind still worked okay. Not that it was much consolation.

She shook her head and took another good look at her image in the mirror. At least she was still sporting a pretty good tan, the result of spending all of August working at the church youth camp. And her legs were actually in pretty good shape. Running up and down all those trails, trying to keep up with the crazy middle school girls, had paid off.

"Hey, Sophie, you coming outta there anytime soon?" Carrie Anne asked.

Sophie grabbed up her cargo pants. "Yeah, I'm still getting dressed."

"I'm going to get that last pair of jeans I tried on. Meet me at the cash register, okay?"

"Sounds good." Sophie pulled on her loose pants. The well-worn fabric felt cool and soft against her skin, fantastic com-

pared to that last pair of horrid jeans. She slipped into her Banana Republic flip-flops and reached for her bag. Carrie Anne would probably appreciate it if Sophie fixed up her face a bit. Besides, who knew whom she might run into here at the mall? So she put on some fresh lip gloss, adjusted her smudged mascara, and even removed the haphazard ponytail, brushing and fluffing out her naturally wavy hair. There, much better.

Carrie Anne juggled her shopping bags, holding up her latest purchase like a trophy as the cashier placed her change on the counter. "I'm almost out of money now."

"Big surprise there."

"And I'm starving." Carrie Anne dropped one of her sacks. "Ready for lunch?"

Sophie picked up the fallen bag. "Need some help with those?"

"Yeah." Carrie Anne shoved the largest bag toward Sophie—it was from Macy's and looked like it was about to fall apart. "Take this one too. It's what you get for not buying anything yourself."

"Maybe I'll find something after lunch." Sophie rearranged her purse to accommodate the oversized bag. "And next time I'll try one size bigger."

"Or . . .," Carrie Anne's voice sounded cautious, ". . . you could get a really great pair of jeans that are one size too small and use them as an incentive to shed a couple of pounds."

Sophie nodded. "Yeah . . . I guess that could work." But even as she said this, she knew it was ridiculous. Carrie Anne and

her mom were always full of “great” ideas for losing weight. The problem was, although they seemed to work for Carrie Anne and her mom, they never worked for Sophie. Normally Sophie didn’t really care all that much. Normally she was pretty okay with herself. Normally she could make jokes about these things. But for some reason, today felt anything but normal.

Maybe that was why Sophie took her best friend’s hint and ordered carefully for lunch. Low cal, low carb, and low appeal. When they finally found an available table right in the center of the food court, still cluttered with lunch debris and spilled soda, Sophie sat down and frowned at her lunch. A boring green salad topped with a few anorexic-looking chicken strips. Suddenly she found herself lusting after cheeseburgers, pepperoni pizza, and Carrie Anne’s crispy meat burrito and Mexi fries. Still, she tried not to show it as she unfolded her paper napkin and pasted a smile on her face.

“So what’re you doing for Labor Day?” Carrie Anne asked.

“Mom’s driving Bart back to school and won’t be back until Tuesday.” Sophie forked a piece of lettuce. “And Dad plans to keep the tire store open on Monday. Like he thinks everyone and their grandmother will be out shopping for retreads or tire chains that day.” Sophie sighed. “The truth is, he’ll be sitting there watching some lame ball game, pretending to work. Seriously, he needs to join a twelve-step group for ESPN addiction.”



“Why don’t you come out to the lake with us?” Carrie Anne picked up her burrito and took a big bite.

Sophie nodded. “Sure. That sounds great.”

“The Stewarts and the Morrises will be bringing their boats too.”

Sophie stopped chewing. The chunk of chicken in her mouth suddenly felt like wood, and when she tried to swallow, it seemed to get stuck in her throat. Panicking, she took a quick gulp of iced tea, then nearly choked. Coughing and sputtering, she covered her mouth with her hands and wondered if she was about to suffocate.

“Are you okay, Sophie?”

She finally swallowed the hard lump of chicken, took a deep breath followed by a careful swig of tea, then nodded with watery eyes. “I’m fine,” she said in a husky voice.

“Man, I was about ready to do the Heimlich on you.”

“Thanks.” Sophie pushed her half-eaten salad away from her.

“Seriously, are you okay?”

“I said *I’m fine*.”

Carrie Anne blinked. “Well, you don’t have to get mad.”

“I’m not mad.” Sophie focused her attention on folding her napkin into neat triangles, over and over. Kind of like origami, only fatter.

“So anyway, the Stewarts and Morrises will be there, which reminds me”—she shook her finger at Sophie—“you never told me that Dylan Morris was up at Camp Calderwood.”

Sophie shrugged, avoiding Carrie's gaze. "What's to tell?"

Carrie Anne leaned forward. "Well, you know I've had a major crush on Dylan since middle school. Why didn't you call me and tell me he was up there at camp?"

"Well, for one thing, my cell phone had no connectivity. And besides that, you were teaching Vacation Bible School for all of August, remember?"

"Ugh, don't remind me." She frowned. "Now why exactly did I agree to do VBS in the first place? Especially when I could've been up at Calderwood earning some real money and spending time with dreamy Dylan Morris?"

"Uh . . . you mean besides the fact that your dad's head pastor of our church and your mom is in charge of the kids' ministry and you basically had no choice in the matter?"

"Right . . ." Then Carrie Anne brightened. "So did you talk to him at all? I mean, did you mention me to him or anything?"

Sophie shrugged again.

"Come on, did you?"

"Yeah . . . I talked to him."

"About me?" Carrie's brown eyes were wide and eager.

"I guess . . . your name probably came up."

"And?"

"And, I don't know . . . we talked about a bunch of stuff."

"A *bunch* of stuff?"

Sophie knew she needed to change the subject. "So, are you ever going to finish your lunch? I mean, I still have a lot

of shopping to do, and you're just sitting there blabbing on and on and not even touching your food and—"

"Sorry," Carrie Anne snapped. "Excuse me for keeping you waiting."

Sophie snatched up a couple of Carrie Anne's Mexi fries and shoved them in her mouth. "Well, you're the one who's freaking that I'll show up at school wearing something the dog dragged in, or maybe more like something the cat barfed up."

Carrie Anne laughed so hard she snorted.

"Very attractive."

Soon they were back to shopping again. As torturous as it was trying on jeans and tops and skirts and sweaters, it was highly preferable to talking about Dylan Morris. And even though it meant taking fashion advice and some even more ridiculous dieting suggestions from Carrie Anne, as well as purchasing a couple of items that Sophie didn't really like, she knew it was worth the sacrifice to keep any and all questions about the past month and Camp Calderwood and Dylan Morris at bay.

Now all Sophie needed to do was to come up with a viable excuse for not going out to the lake with Carrie Anne on Monday.