

Melody Carlson



Limelight

A Novel



Praise for
Melody Carlson and *Limelight*

“A compelling tale of one woman’s journey from the excitement of the limelight to contentment in the twilight. When eighty-two-year-old Claudette is forced to leave her pampered Hollywood life and return to the backward town she escaped decades ago, she isn’t sure she wants to continue living—especially if it means facing her estranged sister and the secret she has avoided for years. *Limelight* is a beautiful coming-of-age story at the other end of the spectrum.”

—VIRGINIA SMITH, author of *Third Time’s a Charm* and the Sister-to-Sister series

“...any story by Carlson is worth encountering.”

—*Booklist*

“Melody Carlson’s style is mature and biting funny, and her gift for connecting our heart to the character’s plight also connects us to the complicated human condition and our need for one another.”

—PATRICIA HICKMAN, author of *Painted Dresses*

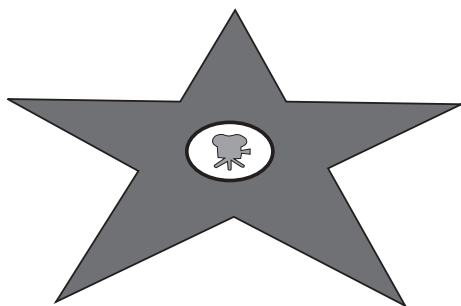
“With great confidence, I can say that Melody Carlson’s story will enlighten, encourage, and empower you.”

—GREGORY L. JANTZ, PHD, Founder and Executive Director of the Center for Counseling & Health Resources Inc.

“Melody Carlson never fails to drag us out of our Christian easy chairs and right into the coals of the confusing culture in which we all find ourselves. She never fails to reveal that place of compassion within each of us. Excellent.”

—LISA SAMSON, author of *The Church Ladies* and
Tiger Lillie

Limelight



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A Mile in My Flip-Flops

These Boots Weren't Made for Walking

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Just Another Girl

NONFICTION

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Piercing Proverbs

Melody Carlson

Limelight



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I used to be a beauty. You know the sort of woman—she walks into a room and heads turn. Oh, I don't mean just male heads because, believe me, women look too. Maybe they do it a little more inconspicuously, as if they're just checking out the latest shoe styles. But usually, they're comparing, inventorying, mentally tallying up who's the thinnest, fairest, trendiest. Who can turn *more* heads. It's the game we all play but no one ever admits to—a game that ends too quickly. Because, despite our efforts, age creeps in, beauty fades...and along with it, the limelight.

I am a testament to the temporary rewards of beauty. I sit alone in this sorry institution where no one comes to visit and no one gives a whit that I, Claudette Fioré, a woman who once made heads turn and broke hearts, have lost everything. No one knows who I am or who I used to be. No one even cares. It is no wonder that I tried to end my life. And yet I couldn't even succeed at that. Just one more notch of uselessness on the weighty belt of old age.

Of course, there are those fools who think that simply because I am old, I also must be wise. They assume that all these

many years of life and experience have somehow broadened something besides my flabby backside. But I fear they are mistaken. I am nothing more than a silly woman who has grown unbearably old. A misshapen and withered shell that holds little more than wounded pride and faded memories. And yet I still manage to deceive a few—but only those willing to be tricked. Like that silly volunteer girl who comes in here twice a week. I suspect she is performing community service, although she will not admit to as much. Her name is Lucy, I believe. Or is it Lindy? Or Lulu? Oh, how am I supposed to remember such trivia?

“You’re looking fine today, Mrs. Fioré,” she told me this afternoon. It’s the same thing she says every time I see her. Why don’t they train these girls to use a variety of greetings? But then, what can you expect from a place that uses a rotating weekly menu with entrées like Salisbury steak and liver and onions?

“Fine?” I rolled my eyes and ran my hand through my thinning hair, sadly in need of professional attention and white as cotton since they don’t allow me to tint it here in the “home.” I’ve considered asking this girl to help me escape to see André, my hairdresser, to get it properly done, but why bother? Who cares?

She smiled as she straightened the pictures on my bureau. Sylvia, my faithful cook, brought them to me, along with some other things from my home. I suspect she was trying to cheer me up. Most of the photos are of me. Naturally, they were taken when I was younger, prettier, alive. However, one photo is with

Gavin, and another is with my younger sister, back when we were speaking to each other.

She's an intelligent woman but plain faced and frumpy. We make an odd pair, since she wasn't born with the looks that came anywhere close to matching my own, and she never learned how to make the most of what little she had. But all the photos were purposely selected to show me at my best, my prime. Why would I not be?

"So, how are you feeling?" She came over to peer into my pale blue eyes. They were once bright and clear...bluer than the Pacific on a cloudless day. Fiery blue, I was once told by a man who thought he loved me. Now they are faded and weak, and despite laser surgery, I must squint to read her name tag. Lindy, yes, just as I thought.

"As well as can be expected for someone locked up in a place like this." My usual retort to her usual question. But still she smiled, undeterred by my nastiness. It was part of the game we played.

"Oh, Mrs. Fioré, there are worse places to be, you know."

"I can't imagine where."

"Then don't waste your imagination going there. Instead, why don't you tell me about other places you've been?"

Ah, now this was more like it. The only thing good about this silly Lindy character was that she liked to hear about what my life *used* to be like. Or at least she acted that way. I could never be completely sure. I suppose that was the long-term result of having spent most of my days among people who often

said one thing and meant another. Still, I was bored silly by myself and my dismal surroundings today, so I played along.

“You were telling me about your mother the other day...” She tossed me the bait as she straightened the sheets on my narrow bed. “I believe she had just sewn you and your sister new dresses.”

I nodded as the memory drifted down on me like a downy blanket. I had given myself liberty with this young woman. She was so far removed from my social sphere, so foreign to the world I had inhabited for so many years, that I had come to think of her as a “safe” person—and, trust me, there have been few. I believed she was someone I could tell secrets to, memories that had lain hidden for all of my adulthood.

“Yes, that’s right,” I began. “Violet, my sister, and I were around four and six at the time. Violet is younger than I, although for decades she’s been mistaken for my much older sister. Poor Violet, she’s aged so much faster than I.”

“What time of year was it?” Lindy fluffed my down pillow, one of my few luxuries in this stark environment.

I actually bribed one of the interns to purchase it for me. Most of my valuables were locked up for “safekeeping,” but I tempted the young man with my Cartier Tank watch. Quite a deal for him, considering the watch must have been worth the price of dozens of fine down pillows.

“Spring,” I told her. “But these weren’t Easter dresses, as I recall. Or if they were, I must’ve been allowed to wear mine to school.” I sighed as I remembered the reception I got at Silverton

Elementary that day. “Of course, all the other little girls were dressed like ragamuffins, and when they saw me, why, their eyes nearly popped out of their straggly heads. I was the envy of the entire first grade. Maybe the whole school, for that matter.”

“How did that make you feel?”

I scowled at Lindy. She had this obnoxious way of asking intrusive questions that I’d rather not think about, let alone answer. But I knew the game well enough to know that to keep her attention, I must at least attempt an answer.

“I probably felt a bit bad. And yet...I enjoyed having the prettiest dress. I can still remember the fabric too. It was a pale yellow dotted swiss that my grandmother had sent up from the Bay area. And my daddy said I looked just like a sunbeam in it. And he told me how my blond pigtails shimmered like spun gold in the sunshine.

“Oh, I knew I was pretty, all right. Probably the prettiest little girl in town. And why shouldn’t I be? Some people are simply chosen to live above the rest—the *crème de la crème*, we rise to the top. I think it was around then that I began to suspect I would one day be the golden girl of Silverton. I knew my value would lie in my looks.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because my folks were poor.” I sighed. Surely, I’d told Lindy this already. “Oh, everyone hit hard times during the Depression.” I tried to be patient with this poor numbskull of a girl. “But even in the best of times, my folks were fairly strapped, back when I was little anyway. My daddy didn’t much care for

working; he felt it was hard on his back and callused his hands. And although my mother took in laundry, cleaned houses, did odd jobs when she got the chance...it wasn't enough to keep a family of four fed."

"So it must've been special for you to have a new dress."

"I'll say. I thought I was Queen for a Day. Of course, that was back before I'd ever heard of such a thing. But I'm sure I imagined myself to be a princess in a fairy tale. And in some ways, my fate was set on that spring day. I knew I was too good for our dusty little town. I knew I was destined for greatness."

"You knew that when you were only six?"

"Oh, I probably couldn't have expressed it in so many words, but I had this feeling deep inside me, this undeniable sense that someday I would really be, oh, *something*."

She nodded with a hard-to-read expression, but one that aggravated me to the core. Just who was this upstart of a girl, and why did she come to visit me? Perhaps I should be more careful with my words.

"Is something wrong, Mrs. Fiore?"

"Why are you here?" I peered closely at her pasty complexion. Had this poor girl never heard of rouge or what they called blush nowadays?

She smiled, exposing slightly crooked teeth. "I've told you before that I'm from the university...that I volunteer here to get credit for one of my classes."

I scowled at her, knowing full well that frowning only deepened the creases between my brows, but it no longer mattered

how many wrinkles I incurred. Then I smiled at her. It was an insincere smile, but I doubted that she would know the difference. “What is your major, dear?”

She glanced away as if uncomfortable.

“You come here and pester me with your silly questions. Personal queries that I answer honestly. But I ask you a simple question and you close up on me like an angry clam.” I leaned forward and peered even more closely at her. She really was a homely little thing with her mousy hair and oversized nose. “Why is that?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Fioré. My major is clinical psychology.”

My jaw tightened. “So I am your guinea pig? You ask your prying questions without disclosing your purposes. Perhaps you plan to practice your junior clinical psychology on me?”

“No, that’s not it...”

I sat up straighter, easing to the edge of my seat. Then placing one hand on each arm of the chair, I hoisted myself to a standing position. “That will be enough.” She stood too, but I was still tall enough to look down on her.

“But we’ve barely started to visit.”

“We are finished, Lucy. And do not come back to see me again.”

“But, Mrs. Fioré—”

“You are dismissed,” I said in my haughtiest voice, the same tone I once used for servants who didn’t understand their place in my household. “Good-bye.” I turned and slowly walked away.

One of the few things I can be thankful for in my advanced years is my ability to walk. I pretended not to notice others in the room. The pathetic old lump of a woman with greasy gray hair, slumped like a bag of potatoes in her wheelchair...the thin, balding, middle-aged man who chewed his fingernails down to nubs...the doped-up young woman with a tattoo of a serpent crawling down her arm who stared blankly out the window. These people did not interest me. It was obvious they belonged here. I did not.

It was also obvious that I needed to find a way out of this nut house.

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