

Just Another Girl

A NOVEL

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Carlson, Melody.

Just another girl : a novel / Melody Carlson.

p. cm.

Summary: Sixteen-year-old Aster, caught between a self-absorbed older sister and a mentally-disabled younger one, yearns for a normal life and, with her first boyfriend's encouragement and trust in God, she begins to make things better.

ISBN 978-0-8007-3257-8 (pbk.)

[1. Middle-born children—Fiction. 2. Sisters—Fiction. 3. People with mental disabilities—Fiction. 4. Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. 5. Single-parent families—Fiction. 6. Family problems—Fiction. 7. Christian life—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.C216637)tt 2009

[Fic]—dc22

2008033779

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Prologue

For as long as I can remember, I've been stuck in the middle. Like being dealt a loser's hand with no more turns to take, my luck seemed to run out even before I was born. My older sister, Rose, got all the good stuff. Not only did she get the looks in the family, but being an energetic and fairly demanding child, she got the best part of my parents' attention too. I'm pretty sure this is true, because I've seen all the photos of young Rose with my parents—happy snapshots of the three of them laughing and having fun, all taken before I came along.

By the time I was born, only two years later, my mom was already getting a little worn-out by Rose's antics. And I've heard that my dad was severely disappointed that I was not the son he'd been longing for. If I'd been a boy, I would've been named Norman Nelson Flynn, after my dad, but because I was just another girl, my dad left the name-assigning task to my mother, a frustrated botanist who never graduated from college. Naturally, she decided to call me Aster. This is the name of a common and insignificant little flower that's

not very pretty—some people even consider it a weed. Of course, my mom swears she loves asters for their simplicity and hardiness, but I'm still not convinced.

When I was about two, the third baby came along, and if it wasn't bad enough that she was *another* girl (my dad had already purchased an expensive baseball mitt for her), she also suffered from birth defects. Fortunately for this baby, she was quiet and good-natured, and so soft and creamy-white-looking that my mother named her Lily.

My dad hung around for a few more years, but it was easy to see, even for a little kid, that the man was miserable. I remember trying my best to make him happy. And knowing his aversion to his youngest daughter and her special needs, I would try to humor Lily if she ever cried when he was around. I would even try to act like a boy and play ball with Dad in the yard. But, looking back, I can see now that we were steadily losing him. And just before I turned ten, Dad left our house for work one day and never came back. That's when my mom gave me Lily. "You take care of her," she said that summer day. "She likes you."

That was seven years ago, and it seems like I've been taking care of Lily ever since. It's not that I don't love Lily. I do. But sometimes I just get tired, or, like my mom likes to say about herself, "I'm totally burned-out." Of course, I don't say this back to my mom because that would be like throwing fuel onto the fire. Why go there? But sometimes, and more often lately, I think that I deserve to have a life of my own too.

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“I don’t wanna wear dat!” Lily shouts as I hold out what used to be her favorite shirt. It’s an oversized and faded pink T-shirt with what was once a smiling Minnie Mouse on the front. This T-shirt could give the impression that we’ve been to Disneyland, which is not true. Not even close to true.

“Come on, Lily,” I urge. “We need to get ready to go.”

“No!” She juts out her chin and attempts to fold her arms across her chest, but I notice her struggle to perform this old stubborn posture, since her chest, like the rest of her body, has been growing a lot this past year. Even though she’s not quite fifteen, and I’m almost seventeen, the cup size on her bra is a double D while I’m barely an A. Not that I’m jealous exactly.

I pretend to study the pink T-shirt, seeing that Minnie’s face is partially rubbed off, which makes the rodent look slightly disgruntled—sort of how I’m feeling at the moment. But I force a smile and say, “But, Lily, this is your *favorite* shirt.”

“Not today!” she grunts back at me with a frown that creases

her pale, freckled forehead. Lily's monotone voice has always been gravelly, fairly deep, and loud enough to irritate some people, like Rose in particular. But then Rose has no patience for anyone. I have noticed that Lily's voice has gotten even deeper and louder this summer. In fact, my little sister has changed in all sorts of ways. Besides the big breasts, she's gotten a lot heavier. She's not as tall as I am, but she outweighs me by nearly fifty pounds. That can be scary sometimes, especially when she decides she wants to be difficult or go her own way and things turn physical—which I try to avoid at all costs.

I hold up the T-shirt hopefully. It's the only clean thing in her drawer today. I don't want to dig through the dirty laundry, and there's no time to do a quick load. "But Minnie will be so sad if you leave her home, Lily. Don't you want to—"

"No!"

"Okay." I put on my cheerful voice since I do not need a full-blown confrontation right now. All I have to do is get Lily dressed and down to the recreation center, and I can be blissfully free of her until four o'clock this afternoon. I've already packed her lunch with her favorites (a peanut butter and strawberry jelly sandwich on white bread, a not too ripe and not too green banana, and a bag of plain but rippled potato chips), as well as her swim bag with her tangerine swimsuit and matching goggles. But if I don't get her there by ten, she will miss the activities bus, and I'll be stuck with her all day long. "What *do* you want to wear, Lily?"

She points to my T-shirt. "That."

I look down at my olive green Gap T-shirt. I saved up for this shirt, and it fits me perfectly. I do *not* want to loan it to Lily. “It’s too small for you,” I say quietly. I head for her closet to dig through her dirty laundry basket.

“No, it’s not!” she shouts. “You’re older than me, Aster. You’re bigger than me.”

I’m digging through the stinking laundry basket now, trying to find a shirt that somehow resembles my Gap shirt, something to smooth this thing over and get us out the door. Finally I find a bright green tank top and hold it up. It’s totally wrinkled and smells like old sweat and peanut butter and who knows what else, but it’ll have to do. “This is green like my shirt,” I say in my happy voice. “And this color looks so good on you.”

“No!”

“But if you wear this,” I say in a tempting voice, lifting my brows in an appealing way, “we’ll *both* have on green shirts. We’ll be alike, Lily. Like sisters!”

Lily starts to smile now. “Like sistahs?”

I nod. “Yes. Both in green. And we both have greenish eyes too. Cool, huh? Like sisters.”

She nods too. “Yeah, cool. Like sistahs.”

I hear Rose make a loud snort of a laugh from the hallway, and I want to strangle her. “Yeah, right,” she says. “You’ll look just like twins!”

“Yes, we will,” I say quickly. But it’s too late. Lily may be

mentally slow, but she is quick to feel Rose's jabs. She's had years of training, and Rose isn't exactly subtle.

"No, no, no!" Lily shouts, sitting back on her twin bed now. She's still wearing the threadbare top of her teddy-bear pajamas, and she folds her hands across her front as she rocks back and forth repeating, "Not like twins . . . not like twins . . . Aster not my twin! Rose, you know Aster not my twin!"

I step out into the hallway and glare at my older sister. "Thanks a lot!"

But she just laughs. "What's wrong? You don't want to be Lily's twin today?"

"All I want is to get her to the rec center on time," I snap. Rose doesn't even react as she checks out her flawless image in the bathroom mirror. She's been primping for at least an hour. "But maybe you'd like to take her instead."

"Sorry, Aster, but *I* have to go to work." She slips a gold hoop into her left ear. "I have a job."

"Yeah, right." I roll my eyes as I envision her so-called job. Rose "works" in a cheesy shop called Delilah's, where she pushes makeup, hair products, and overpriced accessories. It's in the air-conditioned mall, and she mostly just stands around or chats with her friends. She might sell a few trinkets or give some of her "beauty" advice. Or, if she's really paying attention, she occasionally spots a shoplifter in the act and calls for security, then comes home and brags about how important she is and how hard she works. Tough life.

"You're just jealous." She cocks her head ever so slightly,

tilting her chin up as if she's striking a pose for a camera. Rose thinks she has what it takes to model professionally. I have my doubts, but I keep them to myself.

I bite my lower lip and listen to Lily. She's still in her room, pouting and pounding on something, probably her Little Mermaid pillow, which has seen better days. She's also muttering to herself about how mean Rose and I are, how she's going to tell Mom all about it when she gets home from work, and how we'll both be sorry then. I glance at my watch and realize that Rose might be my only chance now. I force a smile. "Can you drop us off on your way to the mall, Rose?" I beg. "It's on the way."

"Only if you're ready to go *right now*." She fluffs her already perfect strawberry blonde bangs and smiles at her reflection one last time. "And I mean now—not two minutes from now."

"You know that's impossible, Rose."

She just shrugs. "Sorry, I can't be late to work."

"We would've been ready if you hadn't interfered."

But she doesn't care. She never has. All Rose thinks about is Rose.

I hurry back to Lily, trying the green T-shirt routine once again. I use every persuasive trick I know, but she is not buying it, and the clock is steadily ticking. I can almost see the glint in her eyes as she digs in her heels now. She relishes the fact that she is in total control of this situation, fully aware that she has the power to create chaos in my life whenever

she chooses to take the difficult route. That's the road we're stuck on this morning.

"You won't get to see your friends today," I point out.

"I don't care."

"You won't get to go swimming at the big pool." The tone of my voice gets higher at the end of each sentence—my enticing pitch, laced with desperation.

"I don't care."

"You won't have your picnic lunch at the park."

But it's like talking to a stone—a stone that is now rocking back and forth and yelling, "I don't care," at regular intervals. I want to cover my ears and scream. I want to tell her to shut up, shut up, shut up! But I know that won't help. Besides, I know that her life isn't exactly easy. Unlike some of her challenged friends, Lily is not mentally impaired enough to be blissfully oblivious to the teasing that occurs regularly in her life. And yet she's not mentally capable of dealing with the cruelty either. Sometimes she even gets accepted as "normal," although that never lasts for long once they figure things out. It's like she's caught between two worlds. Or kind of like me—she's stuck in the middle.

It's five minutes until ten, and Rose is long gone. I know there's probably not enough time to walk Lily to the rec center now, even if we had one of our pretend races, where I always act tired and let Lily win, and she gives me a hard time for being "slow." But it gets us there sooner. Still, I know there's a slight possibility that other kids are acting out or someone

forgot something or needs to use the bathroom. It's entirely possible and not unlikely that the bus might be getting a late start too. Call me a desperate optimist, but I'm not ready to give up my freedom for today. Not yet.

In fact, I'm so desperate that I actually consider loaning Lily my Gap T-shirt, even though it would be skintight and she'd probably look indecent, plus my shirt would be completely ruined. Sort of like my life.