

FOLLOW YOUR HEART • BOOK 3

Under a Summer Sky

*A Savannah
Romance*

MELODY CARLSON



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Melody Carlson, *Under a Summer Sky*
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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

Names: Carlson, Melody, author.

Title: Under a summer sky : a Savannah romance / Melody Carlson.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Published by Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2017] | Series: Follow your heart ; book 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2016058270 | ISBN 9780800723590 (paper) | ISBN 9780800728922 (print on demand)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3553.A73257 U53 2017 | DDC 811/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016058270>

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1

Nicole Anderson had no idea why her mother had slipped into the back of her art classroom this afternoon, but because this seventh period class was half over, Nicole pretended not to notice. It wasn't easy to ignore that platinum-blond hair styled within an inch of its life. Her sixty-five-year-old mom wore a slightly catty expression as she slid into a vacant chair. Sitting up straight, she pristinely clutched her faux Hermès purse in her lap, and unlike the students, she looked attentive.

Nicole cleared her throat, continuing her lecture on the Renaissance period and trying not to be distracted by her mom, whose pale blue pantsuit looked comically out of place amid the high school students. Slouching in their “uniforms” of shredded denim, faded tees, grubby flip-flops, and strange hairdos, these teens were bored and antsy, and probably too warm since the temperature in the art room was pushing eighty.

Nicole clicked to the next image on the screen. She always

reserved the Renaissance for the last week of her art history class. Not because she was saving the best for last, but because it would be irresponsible to leave it out completely.

“Raphael is considered to be one of the premiere painters of the High Renaissance.” Nicole stared at the somber self-portrait up on the screen. Even Raphael looked restless and discontent. “Born Raffaello Sanzio in Umbria, Italy, this artist is best known for his religious works. In many ways, his style was more lifelike than his predecessors’ . . .” She droned on, surrendering to the heat-induced stupor and wondering why the art department was the only building with no AC. She clicked to the next image.

“Raphael did numerous Madonna and child paintings in various settings. Perhaps he simply wanted to get it just right.” She tried to inject interest into her voice. “Most would agree that he did.” She clicked to *Portrait of a Young Man*. “It’s interesting how Raphael captured the young man with that sideways glance—as if he’s got mischief on his mind.”

Really, she wondered, is this how I planned to spend my life? Boring these disinterested high school students with information they probably wouldn’t retain past their final exam on Friday—if they kept it that long. What was the point? She glanced at the class as she clicked to the next image. To her surprise, a hand raised. Was someone really going to ask a question? Then she realized it was only her mother, waving eagerly like a first grader. Some of the students were looking at her with a smidgeon of curiosity.

Nicole bit her lip. To allow her mother to speak up was dicey at best. Caroline Anderson was unpredictable—she tended to speak first and think later. It might amuse these teens, but Nicole wasn’t ready to witness her class degenerate

into adolescent chaos. It was the last week of school, and as Principal Myers liked to say, the natives were restless. Why encourage them?

“Miss Anderson?” her mother called out. “I have a question.”

“Class,” Nicole said in a flat tone, “our unexpected visitor happens to be my mother.” She forced a smile, hoping to appear more mannerly than she felt. “I’d like you to meet Mrs. Anderson.” She looked directly at her mother. “You have a question?”

“Yes, Miss Anderson, I do.” Her mother’s blue eyes twinkled as she stood up. “I’m curious. Have you ever seen any original works of this particular artist? And if you have, will you please tell us about it?”

Of course, her mother already knew the answer, but for some reason she wanted Nicole to share with the class. Nicole took a deep breath, noticing that her students actually looked somewhat attentive just now. Perhaps this was a teachable moment.

“As a matter of fact, I have seen a few pieces of Raphael’s original art.” She told them about how she’d spent a year touring Europe after graduating from college. “It was a really sweet gift from my parents and turned out to be an amazing trip for me. Seeing the actual works of the people I’d studied made the art come to life for me. When I walked past the pond where Paul Gauguin had done the lily pad painting, I could almost feel his presence.” She told them about visiting the Louvre and some of the Renaissance works there. To her pleasant surprise, most of her students perked up, and some of them actually seemed to be listening with genuine interest.

She continued to tell them about Florence, Italy, pointing

out how Raphael and some of his contemporaries lived there. “You can imagine how it would inspire them to be living around other artists, exchanging ideas and—” She was cut off by the bell, signaling that her last class and the school day had ended. “That’s all for today,” she called out as the students gathered backpacks and things, making a mass exodus.

A girl named Alyssa paused by the door. “That’s pretty cool, Miss Anderson. I wish I could go to Europe like you did.”

“Yeah, me too,” the boy behind her said.

“Maybe you will,” Nicole said.

After the students had exited, Nicole smiled at her mother. “Thanks for asking that question, Mom. It was just what we needed.”

Caroline Anderson laughed as she walked to the front of the classroom. “Seemed like you were losing them, honey. I figured a little maternal prodding couldn’t hurt.”

“Well, I’ve never been particularly fond of the Renaissance period.” Nicole shut down the program on her computer and turned off the projector. “I appreciate what it did for the art world and all that, but it’s just not my cup of tea. You know?”

Her mom gave her a little hug. “I understand completely.”

Nicole closed her laptop. “But why are you here?”

“Because I knew you were stuck.”

“Huh?” Nicole frowned. “How could you possibly . . . ?”

“I meant stuck in general, Nikki.”

“What do you mean? Stuck how?” She studied her mom’s carefully made-up face. For sixty-five, this woman looked pretty good.

“Oh, you know . . . the things you were telling me last

weekend at Michael's birthday party—about how you felt sort of lost since you and Peter broke up, and you felt stuck in your job.”

“I really said *that*?” Nicole tried to remember how much she'd divulged at her nephew's birthday party.

“You sounded like you were looking for a change.”

Nicole sighed. She'd been feeling a little envious of her older sister's picture-perfect life last weekend. Oh, she knew Katy had her own challenges. But maintaining her career and raising three boys with a man she loved—sometimes it looked pretty good. “I was obviously kind of down that day, Mom. I didn't mean to dump on you about—”

“No, no, that's not it. It's just that I have something exciting to tell you. And since you're all done with classes today, why don't you let me take you out for a cup of coffee.” She waved her hand like a fan. “Or maybe something icy. Good grief, it's like a sauna in here. How can you stand it?”

“Even with all these windows, it gets pretty stuffy in here. Especially this time of year. And this building doesn't have air-conditioning.” Nicole wondered why she felt so defensive about her “sauna.”

“It has been unseasonably warm for Seattle this week,” her mom offered.

“Anyway, I'd be happy to escape for a while.” Nicole went over to close the door that she'd propped open with a heavy clay pot. “Hopefully it'll cool down some after the sun goes behind those trees. But I need to come back here when we're done. I have to fire up the kiln.” She pointed to the pottery lined up on the counter. “I need to get those fired before the end of the week. I've been trying to run it at night because of the heat.”

“My poor girl,” Caroline said. “They’ve got you working in an honest-to-goodness sweatshop here.”

Nicole laughed as she went for her bag. “A lot of people would love to have my job,” she called from her office. “One more year until tenure.” Even as she said this, she wasn’t certain she cared. Was tenure about job security or about getting stuck in a job she didn’t really love? What was the point? She locked her office, and now more curious as to what her mother had to tell her, she hurried back out.

“So what’s up, Mom?” she asked.

“Not yet.” Caroline chuckled.

As they walked out to the visitors’ parking lot, Nicole continued to question her mother, determining that her news was nothing related to their family but still not getting to the bottom of it. “Can’t you just give me a clue?” Nicole said as she got into the passenger seat of her mom’s sedan.

“Okay.” Caroline started the engine. “It’s related to Vivian Graham.”

Vivian had been Caroline’s best friend throughout high school and college. She and her husband Robert lived in Savannah, Georgia, and were very wealthy. Caroline and Vivian had tried to remain close over the years, sometimes visiting each other’s homes on opposite sides of the country, occasionally sharing family vacations at places like the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone National Park. But Nicole hadn’t really heard much about Vivian and her family in recent years.

“I haven’t seen Vivian since I was fifteen—when we went to Alex’s college graduation.” Nicole tried not to recall how hurt she’d felt when Vivian’s attractive older son had totally ignored her. Naturally, Alex had seen Nicole as a juvenile. He had no idea that she’d been crushing on him since she was ten

years old, during the summer their families had spent a week at Yellowstone and Alex had rescued her from being trampled by a buffalo. She felt childish even thinking of her crush now.

“Well, Vivian called me up this morning. Straight out of the blue. I don’t think we’ve had an actual conversation since her grandbaby was born.”

“Vivian has a grandbaby?”

“Oh, I’m sure I told you about it before. You remember that Alex got married—that was years ago. Poor Vivian was so disappointed they didn’t have a wedding. The selfish kids ran off to Vegas.”

“Oh yeah.” Nicole nodded, remembering how vexed her mom was that there hadn’t been a wedding. Nicole herself hadn’t been too pleased to hear that Alex had gotten married. “So back to Vivian, Mom. She called you this morning?”

“Yes. I couldn’t have been more surprised. Oh, we still exchange Christmas and birthday cards, but we haven’t actually spoken in years. Viv has encouraged me to join one of those online social clubs, but you know me, Nikki, I hate computers.” She snagged a parking place near the neighborhood Starbucks. “All that electronic stuff just gives me the heebie-jeebies. Don’t know how your father can waste so much time on his computer. It’s just plain silly.”

Nicole laughed as she pointed to her mom’s smartphone sticking out of her purse. “Well, at least you know how to use that now. That’s better than nothing.”

Caroline turned off the engine and reached for her phone. “That reminds me, I have to show you the pictures I took at JJ’s ball game yesterday—”

“How about you send them to me?” Nicole said as they got out of the car.

“Anyway, Viv and I had a very interesting conversation.” Caroline’s brows arched.

“That is somehow related to me?” Nicole held the Starbucks door open for her mom.

“Well, as it turns out, it just might be. You see,” Caroline continued as they stepped into the short line, “Vivian and Robert are celebrating their fortieth anniversary this summer by taking a world cruise. Can you imagine *three months* of being pampered on a luxurious ship that goes all around the world?” She sighed. “But then they’re rich.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“I’m sure that Vivian called me to brag a little. Really, I can’t blame her. I’d tell everyone I know if your dad was taking me on a trip like that.” She paused to order an iced mocha, and Nicole followed suit, trying to make sense of her mother’s monologue about Vivian’s charmed life.

“But Robert comes from money. Old money. According to Viv, they inherited quite a sum after his dad passed away.” She shook her head. “I can only imagine.”

“You’re not exactly impoverished,” Nicole said.

“I know that. But we’re not the Grahams.”

Nicole smiled. “And I’m glad you’re not.”

As they picked up their iced mochas, Caroline continued to rattle on about how “fortunate” Vivian and Robert were. After they were seated, Nicole held up her hand. “Okay, Mom, can you please get to the part about why this involves me? I’ve had a long day and an even longer school year, and my brain is starting to get a little fuzzy.”

Caroline gave her a sly-looking smile. “Well . . . do you recall that Vivian owns a gallery in Savannah?”

Nicole tipped her head to one side. “That kind of rings

a bell. Didn't we look at a vacant building when we were in Savannah that last time? Vivian was talking about getting it for an investment?"

"Yes, that's right. Vivian bought that building. A few years later she opened an art gallery—I guess it was about a dozen years ago. The Graham Gallery, she said it's called. It took a while for it to catch hold, and then there was the recession. But apparently it's fairly well established now. I guess it's been kind of like her baby—even more so after her boys were grown and all. It actually sounds rather nice."

"Uh-huh." Nicole tried to imagine it as she sipped her iced mocha.

"Viv was telling me all about her gallery and these art exhibits she has lined up for the upcoming summer, complaining about how hard it would be to leave it all behind—to go off on her fabulous *world cruise*." Caroline rolled her eyes, then laughed. "In the meantime, I got this brilliant idea."

"Oh?" Despite her weariness, Nicole's curiosity was piquing.

"It was slightly miraculous how this idea occurred to me—almost like a divine inspiration."

"Seriously?" Nicole frowned.

Caroline nodded firmly. "Don't be such a skeptic, Nikki. It's entirely possible that God gave me this idea. Anyway, I suddenly realized that you, my dear, are exactly what Vivian needs."

"What she needs?"

"To manage her gallery."

"To manage her gallery?"

"Good grief, is there an echo in this room?" Caroline glanced dramatically around, then narrowed her eyes at Nicole. "Please, dear, stop repeating everything I say."

Under a Summer Sky

Nicole just stared at her mom. Did she honestly think Nicole could simply drop everything, uproot her life for an entire summer, and relocate to Savannah? Furthermore, did she really think Nicole knew the first thing about running an art gallery?