



courting  
mr. emerson

MELODY  
CARLSON



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO 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: Courting Mr. Emerson / Melody Carlson.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2019]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018026774 | ISBN 9780800735272 (paper : alk. paper)

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

Classification: LCC PS3553.A73257 C68 2019 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018026774>

ISBN 978-0-8007-3567-8 (casebound)

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19 20 21 22 23 24 25      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# one

George Emerson didn't need anybody. Or so he told himself as he carefully shaved with his straight-edged razor, just like he always did seven days a week at exactly 7:07 each morning. George knew that most men used more modern razors, but this silver implement had been left to him by the grandfather who'd helped raise him. Wiping his razor across a soft terry towel, he stretched his neck to examine his smoothly shaved chin in the foggy mirror. He could see better with his reading glasses, but after so many years of the same routine, George felt certain the job was done right.

As he closed the bathroom window, shutting out the humming "music" of his overly friendly neighbor, George wondered if there was some polite way to avoid Lorna Atwood this morning. She'd been puttering around her yard for the last ten minutes, and George felt certain it was in the hopes of catching him on his way to work.

As he replaced the cap on his Barbasol shave cream and returned his razor to its chipped ceramic mug, a ping in the

kitchen told him that the coffee was done. The automatic-timed coffee maker was one of the few modern perks that George had been talked into a few years ago. But, as with most electronic devices, he still didn't fully trust the fancy machine. What if it got its wires crossed and decided to make coffee in the middle of the night?

George peeked out the kitchen window as he filled his stainless steel travel cup with steaming coffee, only to see that Lorna was now sitting on her front porch. He slipped two thin slices of whole wheat bread into the toaster, removed a hard-boiled egg from the fridge, and poured himself a small glass of grapefruit juice. This was his standard weekday breakfast. On weekends he'd sometimes fry or poach himself an egg or, if feeling particularly festive, he might stroll over to the Blue Goose Diner and splurge on pancakes and bacon, which he'd leisurely consume while reading the newspaper. Although it had probably been more than a year since he'd indulged in that.

But today was Friday, and by 7:27, George's breakfast was finished, his dishes washed. With his travel mug refilled and briefcase in hand, he locked his front door, checked to be sure it was secure, then checked again just in case. Lingering for a moment, he pretended to check his watch, glancing left and right to be sure Lorna wasn't lurking nearby.

The sun seemed high in the sky for late May, but that was only because he'd never fully adjusted to the late-start days that Warner High had implemented last fall. Although it had disrupted his internal time clock, George had to admit that students seemed moderately more awake with an extra hour of sleep.

"Hello, Mr. Emerson," Lorna Atwood chirped merrily.

She popped out from the shadows of her front porch like a jack-in-the-box in Lycra. “Lovely day today, isn’t it?”

He peered up at the cloudless sky then nodded an affirmative. “Looks like a good one, for sure.”

“Especially for this time of year in western Oregon. Last year it rained all the way through May and June.” She hurried over to him with a hot pink coffee cup in hand. Had she coordinated it to match her lipstick? “Now, you didn’t forget about my invitation, did you?” Lorna looked hopeful.

George feigned confusion then tapped the side of his forehead. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Atwood, but I realized that I do have other plans for tonight. I hope you’ll please excuse me.”

“Oh, well.” Her smile remained fixed. “Perhaps another time. With summer round the corner, we should have plenty of chances to get together. I’ll just have to take a rain check from you.” She peered upward. “Speaking of rain checks, I heard it’s supposed to cloud up this weekend. Maybe I can collect on mine then.” She winked.

George forced a polite smile as he tipped his head and continued past her small yard. Her lawn was in need of mowing again. Hopefully he wouldn’t have to remind her of her rental agreement and that she was responsible for her own landscaping chores. The little yellow bungalow, owned by him, was nearly identical to the one he lived in—except his was cornflower blue. His grandparents had helped him to invest in these little neglected houses in the late eighties, back when real estate had been ridiculously low. He’d purchased the first bungalow for his own use shortly after acquiring his teaching position at the nearby high school. Since he had no

interest in driving, it had made sense to live within walking distance of his work. And he'd been employed at Warner High ever since.

With the help of his grandfather's handyman expertise, George had spent weekends and evenings fixing up his little blue house. It provided a good distraction from the dreams that had not gone as planned. Perhaps that was why his grandparents had encouraged him to take on three more little houses—to divert him from his pain and to keep him occupied. Of course, they wisely called it a “good investment.” Plus it proved a clever way to increase real estate values in his neighborhood. Buying derelict properties had seemed a bit reckless at the time, especially since residents were fleeing urban neighborhoods, flocking to the “safety” of the suburbs. But in the past decade, the trend had reversed. People returned to town, and rentals in his neighborhood were at an all-time high. His three rental bungalows, just one block away from downtown, never went unoccupied nowadays.

Mrs. Atwood, his most recent tenant, had been overjoyed to get in. Although she'd only been here a few months, George soon learned to exercise caution when engaging with her. The gregarious divorcée could “chat” nonstop if given the opportunity. He suspected her husband had fled in order to attain some peace and quiet, although Mrs. Atwood claimed to be the victim of her ex-husband's “midlife crisis.” To be fair, she wasn't bad looking—just talked too much. And tried too hard.

George had performed some minor repairs on the bungalow shortly after she moved in. Grateful for his “improvements,” she eagerly invited him for dinner. When he declined,

she insisted on baking him her “famous cherry pie.” He pretended to appreciate her gesture, but the overly sweet and syrupy pie wound up in the trash since George wasn’t big on desserts. Just the same, he penned a polite thank-you note and taped it to the clean pie plate that he discreetly placed on her porch very early the next morning. But since then, her efforts to befriend him had only intensified—and, short of rudeness or dishonesty, he was running out of excuses to decline.

George was no stranger to feminine attempts to *befriend* him, and over the years, he’d learned to take women’s flattering attentions in stride. It wasn’t that he was devastatingly handsome—he might be getting older, but he wasn’t delusional. Even in his prime, back in the previous millennium when his students had nicknamed him “Mr. Bean,” George had been aware that he was no Cary Grant. The comparison to the quirky BBC character may have been meant as an insult, but George hadn’t minded.

He actually kind of admired Mr. Bean. And George knew the kids’ teasing was the result of his buttoned-up attire. His response to kids dressing like gangbangers had been to step it up by wearing nappy ties and sports coats to school—an attempt to lead by example. Not that it had worked. But it was a habit he’d continued and, despite his fellow teachers’ preference for casual dress, George liked his more traditional style. Ironically, it seemed the ladies liked it too. At least they used to, and ones like Mrs. Atwood apparently still did.

Now that he was in his midfifties, George suspected that women like Mrs. Atwood weren’t attracted so much by his appearance as by his availability. It had never been particularly

easy being a bachelor. Sometimes he'd suspected someone had pinned a target to his back. But as the years passed, many began to refer to him as a "confirmed bachelor." Truth be told, George didn't mind the confirmed part—it sounded better than being committed.

"Good morning, Mr. Emerson." Jemma Spencer waved to him as she bounded up the front steps to the school. "Isn't it a gorgeous day!"

"It certainly is." George politely opened the door for her, waiting as the younger woman went in ahead of him. Jemma was new at Warner High. Fairly fresh out of college, she was energetic and strikingly pretty—and, like most of his fellow teachers, young enough to be his daughter. "And how are things going in the Art Department, Miss Spencer?" He paused to show his ID badge at the security check.

"The natives are restless." Her dark brown eyes sparkled as if she were restless too.

"Yes, with only six days left of school, you have to expect that. Especially on a warm, sunny day like this."

"I think I'll take my students outside today," she confided as they continued toward the main office together, "to draw trees or flowers or clouds or butterflies or whatever. Maybe they'll just stare off into space, but hopefully it'll get the ants out of their pants."

He chuckled. "You're a brave woman."

"Not really, it's just that I'm kinda antsy too." She winked as they turned down the hall by the office. "I'm counting the days until summer break."

"Any big plans?" he asked with mild interest.

"My boyfriend and I are going to Iceland," she declared. "Interesting—"

*“Iceland?”* a male voice called out from the faculty room. “Did someone say Iceland? I went there for spring break and it was fabulous. Want to see my photos?”

Suddenly many of the younger teachers were talking at once, sharing phone photos, eagerly recounting travel experiences, talking about the lure of Iceland or other exotic locales, and bragging about various offbeat plans for their upcoming summer. In the past, George might’ve engaged in this sort of enthusiastic banter—even sharing some of his own travel stories—but since he’d made no plans for the upcoming summer . . . or the past several summers for that matter, he kept his mouth closed and simply collected papers from his mailbox and checked the staff bulletin board. Then, without looking back, he quietly exited the noisy faculty room.

As he walked toward the Language Arts Department, George felt old. Not in a stiff, sore, achy sort of way—although he knew the spring had been missing from his step for some time now. He felt old as in outdated—like the dinosaur of Warner High. It was no secret that he was the oldest teacher on staff, or that the administration had been encouraging him to retire the last couple of years. But now he was nearly fifty-five, which sounded dangerously close to sixty, and budgets had been cut once again. His principal knew she could save money by hiring a less senior language arts teacher. George had resisted her in the past. But this year, he’d caved.

After a bad bout of flu last winter, George had given in, announcing that this would be his last year to teach. And now, in less than a week, he would be officially retired after more than thirty years. Not that anyone appeared to put

much value on experience nowadays . . . or even care that he would soon be gone.

More and more, George had begun to feel invisible at this school, as if each year diminished his presence. Even the students looked right through him at times. Not that it was so unusual for a teacher to be ignored. As an English instructor he was accustomed to his students' general lack of interest in academia. He tried to impress upon them the need for good writing skills—and sometimes they got it. But thanks to this electronic age, which he detested, there was a complete disregard for spelling and grammar and structure. As hard as he'd tried to make his favorite class—English literature—relevant and appealing, most of his students didn't know the difference between Chaucer and Shakespeare. Even more, they didn't care.

He sighed as he clicked the pass-code pad numbers beside his classroom door. He remembered a time when no doors were locked inside of campus. Now everyone had pass-codes for everything. Security cams and uniformed police abounded—so much so that he sometimes felt like he was teaching in a prison. And to be fair, some of his students might be better off in a prison. He flicked on the fluorescent lights then walked through the stale-smelling classroom. Not for the first time, he wished the high windows could open and get fresh air in here. He'd raised this issue before, pointing out how it might actually help to wake the students up. But thanks to budget challenges, no changes had been made.

As George punched the number code into his office door, he remembered what this school had been like back in the *dark ages*—back when he'd been a student in this very build-

ing, back when dinosaurs roamed freely. What a different world that had been. Although the building, which was new and modern back then, hadn't changed much.

But then some things never changed. Over the years he'd observed that teens from every decade bore striking similarities. Peel back the veneer of current trends and fashions and you'd usually discover a frustrated mix of rebelliousness and insecurity. To be fair, his generation had been no different. He remembered the late seventies well. His class had its share of druggies and dropouts and slackers, yet his peers, even all these years later, felt more real to him than today's youth. Of course, it was possible that his memory was impaired by his age, but when he looked back he saw an authenticity that he felt was missing from kids nowadays.

Maybe it was because his generation hadn't been plugged into all these electronic gadgets and devices . . . pads and pods and phones that were attached at the hip of all his students. Even though the school had a policy of no personal electronics during class time, most of the students managed to bend the rules. It really made him feel crazy at times. What happened to connecting with your friends by looking into their faces while conversing? Or using a phone and hearing a real voice on the other end? He didn't understand these shorthand messages they exchanged, with bad grammar and silly little pictures. And the complaints he got when he explained a letter-writing assignment to his class! You'd think he'd asked them to gouge out their eyeballs—or to destroy their mobile phones.

He'd recently looked out over a classroom only to feel that he was gazing upon a roomful of zombies. It was as if

they were all dead inside—just empty shells. He knew he was old-fashioned, but he honestly believed that computer technology had stolen the very souls of this generation. Of course, this had simply confirmed what he knew—it was time to quit.