

# bright purple

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color me confused

melody carlson



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ISBN 1-57683-950-8

Cover design by [studiogearbox.com](http://studiogearbox.com)

Cover image by Jack Hollingsworth/Getty

Creative Team: Nicci Hubert, Arvid Wallen, Erin Healy, Darla Hightower, Bob Bubnis

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Published in association with the literary agency of Sara A. Fortenberry.

Carlson, Melody.

Bright purple : color me confused / Melody Carlson. -- 1st ed.  
p. cm. -- (Truecolors series)

Summary: When Ramona learns that her best friend since grade school is a lesbian, she struggles to decide how to respond, knowing that people of her community, and even her church, have trouble discussing homosexuality civilly.

ISBN 1-57683-950-8

[1. Best friends--Fiction. 2. Friendship--Fiction. 3. Lesbians--Fiction. 4. Homosexuality--Fiction. 5. High schools--Fiction. 6. Schools--Fiction. 7. Christian life--Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.C216637Bri 2007

[Fic]--dc22

2006016237

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 / 10 09 08 07 06

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## one

MY BEST FRIEND JUST TOLD ME SHE'S A LESBIAN. *A lesbian!*

Just like that, as we're sitting in the food court at the Greenville Mall, Jess calmly makes this little announcement, then adds, "I just thought you should know."

"Real funny." I roll my eyes at her and attempt to turn my attention back to my half-eaten veggie burrito. Jess and I have been best friends since grade school and she's always had this really wacky sense of humor. "Give me a break," I tell her. "Can't you see I'm trying to eat here?"

"I'm serious, Ramie."

"Yeah, right." But even as I try to brush her words away, my head begins to feel a little fuzzy, and for some strange reason my upper lip is starting to feel numb. I wonder if it's something I ate.

"I figured you'd act like this," she says. "I mean going into total denial."

"Quit messing with my mind," I tell her, avoiding her eyes. But at the same time, I can feel this thing way down deep in the pit of my stomach. And I'm getting totally freaked. Is it possible that she is really serious?

"I decided to come out of the closet," she continues in this aggravatingly offhanded way. Like this is no big deal, like people

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make announcements like this every day. “And I need you to believe me, Ramie. Trust me, it’s not easy to say this to you.”

I force myself to look at her now. Her expression is dead serious and I’m pretty sure she’s not joking. But at the same time, she doesn’t really look quite like herself either. Something seems different, and I’m wondering, *Is this really the Jessica LeCroix that I grew up with? Or is this an impostor?* I mean can this really be the same girl who moved in down the street when we were in fourth grade? The girl who taught me how to play soccer and basketball? Can this possibly be the same girl I’ve shared secrets and sleepovers with? Oh sure, she has the same curly dark hair pulled back in a messy tail, those same dark, penetrating eyes, but something about her is different. Maybe it’s just what she’s told me. Can it really be true? Suddenly it’s like I am scared. Really, really scared. I feel frightened of her. And this shockwave of reality shoots through me.

“Do you really mean this?” I manage to say in a raspy voice. My upper lip is so numb now that it feels like it’s been shot with Novocain, and I actually reach up to touch it to see if it’s still there. This is so freaky. So bizarre. Maybe it’s just a bad dream.

Jess nods, her dark brows pulling together in a deep frown, and it almost looks like she’s fighting to hold back tears.

“Jess?” I hear the strain in my voice as I stare at her, making this silent plea with my eyes, like, *tell me this isn’t really happening*. Or that it’s just a lame joke. Or wake me up and tell me that it’s just a horrible nightmare.

She presses her lips together as if she’s afraid to say another word. Then she looks down at the table and lets out a long sigh. “I’m sorry if you hate me now,” she mutters. “But it’s true.”

And that’s when I start to feel sick, really sick, like I’m-going-to-hurl sick, like I-better-get-out-of-here fast-sick.

“I gotta go,” I blurt as I stand up and make a mad dash to the bathroom. I nearly knock down an old woman as I blast through the swinging door and race into the closest stall just in time to lose my lunch in the toilet. I close the door behind me, then remain in the stall as I attempt to catch my breath and ask myself what just happened. What is going on? What did Jess just tell me? Was it real or did I just imagine it because my burrito made me sick?

I lean my back against the cool metal door and blankly stare at the bright purple tiles that surround the toilet. I am trying to process what I’ve just heard. Trying to decide whether I’m losing my mind. It is possible that Jess is just pulling a fast one on me. Maybe she’s trying to teach me a lesson, to get back at me for trying to match her up with Joey Pinckney last week. Okay, I’ll admit I was just kidding. The kid is kind of nerdy, and some kids think he’s gay, which I doubt, but I’d seen the two of them talking like they really were interested in each other. Who wouldn’t tease about something like that?

“You left your purse at the table,” she says from the other side of the door.

“Thanks,” I mutter, still unable to emerge from my temporary shelter.

“You okay, Ramie?”

“Must’ve been that stupid burrito,” I say as I flush the chunky remains down the toilet and suppress the urge to gag again. “Guess those beans had gone bad or something.”

“Yeah, I’ve warned you about that restaurant. BJ still swears she got food poisoning from their fish tacos last month.” Her voice sounds a little lighter now. As a result, I experience this faint flicker of hope, like maybe this really is just a hoax. Maybe it’s like that *Tom Green Show* where people get scammed while the camera is running.

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*Gotcha!* Maybe Jess is wearing a minicam right this minute and I'm going to be on TV next week.

"You were jerking me around out there, weren't you?" I say as I tear off a big strip of toilet paper and wipe my mouth, then loudly blow my nose. "You didn't really mean what you said, did you, Jess?"

No answer.

Suddenly I think of something that gives me this tiny twinge of hope. "I mean I've heard you making fun of those weird girls at school, Jess, the ones who kiss each other on the lips like it's no big deal. I've heard you saying that they're sick and just trying to get attention. Remember how we'd both say that they were disgusting freaks?"

Still no response.

"Jess?" I take in a deep breath, steadying myself to go out and face her now, to convince her that this is all just a really, really bad joke, but one that I won't hold against her—if we can simply forget the whole thing and go back to life as normal.

"I just wanted to be honest with you, Ramie. I thought it was about time I told you the truth about me."

I lean my head against the door with a dull thud, then tightly shut my eyes. How can this be? How could we have been just sitting there, happily eating our lunch, and then Jess announces that she's gay? Like who does that anyway? And how is it possible that I never even saw this coming? I mean if your best friend has no clue that you're gay, then who does? And how can you be sure that you really are gay? Furthermore, what does that suggest about me? I mean we've been best friends for years. Is it possible that Jess thinks maybe I'm gay too? That she and I can be lovers now? *Ugh!* I think I'm going to barf again.



Then a worse thought hits me. What if I actually am gay and don't even know it yet? Is that even possible? And what will our friends at school say when they find out about this? Or our friends at church for that matter? And how can Jess still be a Christian if she's a lesbian?

Way too many questions go racing around in circles through my head, until I am seriously dizzy. I feel like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, the scene where she's trapped in the little farmhouse that's being spun about by the tornado. Only I'm trapped in this bright purple cubicle that's whirling around and around as my entire life spins totally out of control. *Help me!*

## two

“I CAN’T DEAL WITH THIS RIGHT NOW,” I TELL JESS, TURNING AWAY FROM HER toward the row of sinks. I finally emerged from the whirling purple stall, but I’m afraid to leave the restroom just yet. Maybe I think I’m going to hurl again. Or maybe I just don’t want anyone to see me—or more honestly, to see us—*together*. I glance at my reflection in the mirror above the sink, instantly trying to erase the expression of disgust that’s carved into my forehead. *Try to look natural*, I tell myself as I smooth back some strands of my long dark hair, noticing that I’m due for some straightening again. *Try to act normal*, I think as I pretend to touch up my lip gloss with this new shade of Hot Cocoa that I just bought at Macy’s. *Act as if stuff like this happens all the time*. Yeah, right.

“Sorry,” Jess mutters from behind me. I can feel her watching me now. I wish she would just leave. Just leave me alone! Or maybe she could just vanish altogether.

“My mom is supposed to pick me up at two,” I say as I run water and squirt some pink liquid soap onto my hands. This is a total lie, but it seems necessary. I know that I won’t be able to ride home in Jess’s car today. Or ever again, for that matter. The mere idea of being contained in such a small space with her for more than a few seconds makes me feel nauseous. I continue standing in front

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of the bathroom sink, washing and washing my hands, as if I've just turned into a germ-a-phobe or developed OCD or something. But the truth is I do feel slightly contaminated just now. I think it happened when my hand brushed against hers when she gave me my purse. It's as if I became defiled.

"Why is your mom picking you up?" Jess asks. I can hear the suspicion in her voice and it irritates me. Of course, I'm lying. Who wouldn't under these circumstances? But I continue just the same, digging my hole even deeper.

"I promised to help her find something for her friend's wedding," I say lightly. "Remember Janelle? She's getting married next month and I—"

"Yeah, okay." She throws a strap of her backpack over one shoulder, then walks toward the door. I continue washing my hands.

"Sorry," I say. "I guess I just kinda forgot."

"See ya then," she says.

"Yeah, see ya," I echo, knowing that I never want to see her again. I wish that I'd never met her. Wish that we'd never been friends. I turn off the faucet and feel hot tears coming down my cheeks now. I dry my hands and face on the rough paper towel and stare at myself in the mirror again. Why me? Why does something like this have to happen to me? These bright purple walls and florescent lighting make my normally bronze complexion look like a dark ashen gray, almost as if I'm dead. And that's just how I feel inside—*dead*—as if someone has just knifed me from behind and all the blood has drained out of my body and I am really not here at all. Walking dead.

Then a couple of girls I've never met come into the restroom, and I can feel them looking at me, giggling about some private joke. Maybe they know about Jess. Maybe they suspect that I am like

her too. I turn and leave the restroom, hurrying away, looking for a place to escape to. But mostly, I look to see whether Jess is still hanging around, maybe looking for me, waiting to see whether my mom is really coming to get me, or if it was just a lie. Of course it was a lie. Get a clue, Jess!

But, feeling guilty for lying as well as desperate, I pull out my cell phone and call my mom.

“I thought you were with Jess,” she says with some impatience.

“I was, Mom, but something came up,” I tell her. “Kind of an emergency.”

“Is everyone okay?”

“Yeah. But I need a ride, Mom. Or I suppose I could take the bus.”

“No, no,” she says quickly, just as I knew she would. My mom has this big phobia about me using mass-transit systems. She thinks someone is going to attack me or mug me or rape me or, perhaps worst of all, use some racial slur against me. And so we arrange for her to drive by and pick me up at Macy’s west entrance.

“But I can’t be there for about an hour,” she tells me.

I complain a little, but she insists it’s the best she can do.

“I’m sure you can find something to keep you busy,” she tells me.

So, worried that I’ll run into Jess again, I go into a certain store that she has always really, really loathed—Victoria’s Secret. I wonder about this as I walk around the crowded store. (They’re having their semi-annual sale this week.) I try to understand what exactly about women’s underwear was so abhorrent to her as I pretend to examine a lacy bra that’s about the same color as a yellow fire hydrant. I mean you’d think that a lesbian might get into a store like this, a place where lots of females are trying on skimpy undergarments and . . . Suddenly I feel sick to my stomach again. *What am I thinking?* It’s

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hard to believe that Jess used to be my friend! My *best* friend! I lean over slightly, bracing myself against the big round table of size-36 bras as I take in a deep breath and attempt to erase these repulsive thoughts from my mind.

“Are you okay?” asks a concerned-looking sales clerk.

I stand up straight, still clutching the bright yellow bra. “Yeah,” I say quickly. “I just felt kind of faint, you know. Probably low blood sugar or something.”

She nods. “Did you want to try that on?” she asks, pointing to the bra still in my hands.

“Sure,” I tell her, noticing that it really is a pretty good buy. “If you have it in a B cup.”

So off she goes in search of the right size, and before long I am waiting in line to try it on, along with several other bras as well. This sales girl is good. She managed to find several more in styles she thought I might like—all in shockingly bright colors too. She must think I’m a bright freak. Oh well. I’m just killing time anyway, right? That and avoiding Jess. I can’t imagine a safer place to do it. That is, unless Jess has been stalking me and is secretly hiding in here somewhere. I glance nervously down the hall in the waiting area. But I don’t see her. To be honest, Jess would stand out in this crowd. Perhaps that’s one reason I always assumed she never liked shopping here. Jess is not exactly fat, but she is thick and wide and stocky. Great for a soccer goalie, but a store like this doesn’t exactly stock her size. Besides that, she pretty much sticks to sports bras. I figured that was why she avoided this store. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe her aversion was something more.

I study the women and girls who are waiting in line ahead of me. I wonder if any of them are lesbians. Do any of them have lesbian friends? And how does a person deal with such things anyway? It

hurts my head to think about it. Finally, I go into the softly lit room; I think the dim light is supposed to make the bras or your body look better. I take my time as I try on the vibrant selection, and to my surprise the fire-hydrant one seems to fit perfectly.

By the time I wait in line to purchase it, it's almost time for my mom to get here. Keeping my head down, I hurry down the mall toward Macy's. But when I'm about halfway there, I question this. Why should I have to keep my head down and act like I'm ashamed? I'm not the one who's made the shocking announcement. I have nothing to hide. But even as I tell myself this, I am not convinced. I know how people are, how they think. As soon as word gets out about Jess's sexual orientation, I will be implicated. Guilty by association. My life is over.