

Ordinary Girl, Millionaire Tycoon

Darlene Gardner



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When your life changes in the blink of an eye...Kaylee Carter may have just found her birth mother – and the sense of belonging that's been missing all her life. But Sofia Donatelli's stepson, Tony, is suspicious. He thinks Kaylee's just another parasite who's come to sponge off his wealthy stepmother. Still, whether or not Sofia is related by blood, Kaylee and her son form a bond with her that is stronger than biology. Now, if only Kaylee could convince Tony she's not after money but love – a love that has grown to include him...

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He highly doubted that Kaylee was Sofia's birth daughter, but somebody was. And he had to admit Kaylee looked the part.

"If you're really Constanzia, you'll be able to prove it."

"I never claimed I was Constanzia. All I said is I thought I might be."

"Then get me your birth certificate and adoption papers."

A wariness settled over her like a second skin. "My birth certificate's at my father's house in Houston."

"Let me guess. Your adoption papers are there, too."

She hesitated, but when she spoke her voice was strong. "I guess Sofia didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"I don't have any papers because my parents never admitted I was adopted."

He let out a short, harsh laugh. "Lady, you are a piece of work."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

While working as a newspaper sportswriter, Darlene Gardner realised she'd rather make up quotes than rely on an athlete to say something interesting. So she quit her job and concentrated on a fiction career that landed her at Mills & Boon, where she's written for *Temptation* and *Intimate Moments* before finding a home at *Superromance*.

Please visit Darlene on the web at www.darlene.gardner.com.

Dear Reader,

Where do we belong? With the people who gave us life or those who happen into our lives? That was the question running through my mind when I wrote *Ordinary Girl, Millionaire Tycoon*, about a woman who believes she's finally found her place in the world.

But when that place is populated by a lottery winner who may or may not be her birth mother and the woman's over-protective step-son, matters aren't black and white. Especially when love is thrown into the mix.

Although I'm not new to Mills & Boon, I am new to *Superromance*. It was a pleasure to explore a deeper, richer story in what has always been one of my favourite lines. I hope you enjoy this story.

All my best,

Darlene

PS You can visit me on the web at

www.darlenegardner.com.

Ordinary Girl, Millionaire Tycoon

DARLENE GARDNER



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my grandmothers Rose Gorta and Rose Hrobak, who are gone from this life but not from my heart. I like to think these warm, wonderful women would have enjoyed having a granddaughter who writes about love.

CHAPTER ONE

UNTIL KAYLEE CARTER sat on the television remote and accidentally switched the channel from a *Seinfeld* rerun to the late-night news, she'd thought her mother was dead.

She picked up the remote to change the channel back, but her finger paused on the flash button when the camera panned over lush, rolling countryside that seemed to stretch for miles.

The pink-and-white blooms of apple orchards made the deep green of the grass and the azure, cloud-dotted sky even more lovely. The blossoms caused the gentle hillsides to come alive with color and touched something inside Kaylee that the city never reached, something that ached with longing.

Her modest little duplex in Fort Lauderdale off U.S. 1, which was far too close to a high-crime area where muggings and break-ins were common, seemed to fade into the background.

McIntosh, Ohio, the caption read. Named, if Kaylee wasn't mistaken, for a popular variety of red apple. The warm feelings suddenly made a bit more sense. Kaylee had been born in Ohio, although her parents had returned to their native Texas when she was only a few weeks old and she'd since moved to Florida.

The compelling face of a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman took the place of the orchard. Although Kaylee was positive she'd never seen the woman before, she seemed familiar.

The woman had a timeless quality that made it hard to guess her age. Early forties, perhaps? Her wide-set eyes and shoulder-length hair were as dark as Kaylee's own, her nose as distinctive, her olive complexion nearly as unlined except around the mouth and eyes.

The reason for those lines became evident when the woman smiled, which she obviously did often. An inner glow seemed to light the smile and radiate from her.

Kaylee leaned toward the nineteen-inch television screen, wishing she could have splurged on a bigger set. Another caption identified the woman as Sofia Donatelli, a former cook at Nunzio's Restaurant in McIntosh who'd won ten million dollars in the Ohio lottery.

"I need luck like that," Kaylee murmured.

She scrambled off the worn sofa she'd bought at a garage sale, sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the TV and turned up the sound.

An impossibly handsome reporter with a square jaw, blindingly white teeth and gilded highlights in his brown hair revealed that Sofia had become known in the Ohio Valley for her generosity since winning the prize six weeks ago.

He interviewed a young mother who told how Sofia paid for experimental surgery to help control her daughter's Tourette's syndrome and a businessman who'd gotten seed money from her to open an ice-cream parlor. The camera then switched back to a shot of Sofia and the good-looking reporter.

“You’re probably asking yourself what’s in this lottery bonanza for the woman who won the prize. So tell us, Sofia, what will you splurge on? A mansion in L.A.? A yacht that will take you around the world? A garage full of expensive cars?”

“What I want is something money can’t buy.” Sofia stared straight into the camera, her eyes moist and glowing with an emotion so stark that Kaylee’s chest tightened. “I want to find my daughter.”

Kaylee’s heart pounded so hard she felt it slamming against her chest wall. She edged closer to the set, afraid to miss a word.

“When did you last see your daughter?” the reporter asked.

“When she was a few minutes old. I was sixteen.” Sofia smiled softly, sadly. “I thought the best thing for my baby was to give her up for adoption. I got to hold her, but only briefly. Then the nurse took her away, and I never saw her again.”

“When was this?”

“Twenty-five years ago,” Sofia said, “and there hasn’t been a day since that I haven’t thought of her.”

The remote dropped from Kaylee’s fingers, her heart stuttered and she had difficulty taking in enough air.

Kaylee was twenty-five. She’d never had her suspicion verified, but she’d always believed she was adopted.

It wasn’t only because she was the sole brunette in a family of blondes. Quite simply, she hadn’t belonged. Not in the sweltering flatlands of Houston, where she’d grown up. And not in the Carter family, where her younger sister Lilly had been the favored child.

Kaylee was the one who couldn’t do anything right. She’d been expected to make straight A’s, to stay away from boys, to stick to the ridiculous curfew of 9:00 p.m. and to dress like a nun, rules Lilly always managed to skirt successfully.

Kaylee hadn’t been as lucky. And though she’d rebelled with a vengeance, she never had gotten up the guts to ask her mother if she was really her mother.

She’d asked her father only after her mother died suddenly of a brain aneurysm when Kaylee was in her teens. He’d never had much to say to Kaylee and didn’t then, muttering that she shouldn’t be ridiculous, before changing the subject.

He hadn’t outright said no.

“Have you tried to find your daughter before now?” the reporter asked Sofia Donatelli.

“Many times. My stepson even hired a private investigator a few years back. But I always come up against a brick wall.” Sofia talked with her hands, pantomiming the action of hitting a wall.

“Why do you think this search will be different?”

“Because I won the lottery and you put me on television.” Sofia grew more animated, her hand gestures more pronounced. “There’s a chance that my daughter or somebody who knows her could see this.”

The reporter’s forehead creased with little-used lines. “But how could anyone who sees you on television put the pieces of the puzzle together? You can’t know much more about your daughter than you’ve already told us.”

“Oh, but I do.” Sofia’s smile was bittersweet. “I wanted her to take a little bit of her Italian heritage with her so I stipulated that her adoptive parents keep the name I chose.”

Kaylee’s stomach seized. Her middle name was quintessentially Italian, a striking contrast to the American names of “Kaylee” and “Carter.”

“What is her name?” the reporter asked.

Kaylee held her breath as she waited for Sofia Donatelli’s reply.

“Constanzia,” Sofia said. “Her name is Constanzia.”

The breath whooshed out of Kaylee's lungs. The room seemed to tilt and her head swam so that she couldn't tell whether the sudden flickers on the television screen were due to a failing picture or her glazed eyes.

Kaylee's full name was Kaylee Constanzia Carter.

"Mommy, my tummy hurts."

The soft voice intruded into her consciousness. Her six-year-old son Joey stood in the middle of the living room. His hand rested on his Spider-man pajama top, his eyes drooped and misery clouded his cherubic face.

As she sat on the floor trying to come to terms with her shock and his sudden appearance, his color paled and his face contorted in pain. Kaylee leaped to her feet, scooped him up and reached the toilet in the bathroom the instant before he was sick.

As he retched, she rubbed his back to let him know that she was there. She felt every one of the spasms as though she were the one who was ill. When he was finally through, she ran a washcloth under the cold tap water and wiped his hot, little face. "Do you feel better now, honey?"

He nodded, but his lower lip trembled.

Thinking aloud, she said, "I knew I shouldn't have let you eat that second hot dog at dinner."

"Like hot dogs," he mumbled. He blinked hard, trying valiantly not to cry.

Kaylee's heart turned over. She gathered his small body close but still he didn't surrender to tears. Was it because he'd sensed how hard things had become for her?

Being a single mother had never been easy, but she'd had a live-in support system until six weeks ago. She'd shared expenses, childcare duties and friendship with another single mother who had a little girl Joey's age. Then Dawn met a man, took little Monica and moved away from Fort Lauderdale.

Dawn used to jokingly call Joey the man of the house. Had Joey taken that description too much to heart?

"It's okay to cry if you need to, honey," Kaylee whispered into his soft, sweet-smelling hair.

He held himself so rigidly that she thought he hadn't heard her, but then the tension left his body in a rush and, finally, he cried. Not delicate, silent tears but noisy, shuddering sobs.

Kaylee held him close, glad of the comfort she could offer.

Her son's appearance in the living room had prevented Kaylee from hearing what else Sofia Donatelli had to say. She told herself it didn't matter. Constanzia was her middle name, not her first name. Some other Constanzia was Sofia's birth daughter.

Or maybe you are.

She shut her mind to the thought.

Still, she knew that if she'd seen the news feature years ago, she would have jumped in her car and driven through the night to Ohio in her quest to learn the truth.

But she was a mother now. She had responsibilities and one of those was to curb the rash part of her nature that had gotten her into so much trouble when she was growing up.

The notion that the lottery winner who lived in the lush Ohio Valley could be her mother amounted to nothing but a fantasy.

The sobbing, little boy in her arms who depended upon her was her reality.

CHAPTER TWO

TONY DONATELLI nearly dropped the phone. "You did what?"

"I already told you, Tony. I let that nice young television reporter know I'm searching for Constanzia." Sofia Donatelli made it sound as though she'd been conversing with a friend instead of issuing a potentially explosive announcement.

"The best part was that affiliate stations might pick up the feature and run with it," she continued in the same cheerful tone. "Isn't that wonderful? That means people all across the country might see it."

Tony's fingers tightened on the receiver. "I thought we agreed when I was in Ohio last month that you wouldn't give any interviews. I thought you wanted to keep your life as normal as possible."

"I do," Sofia said. "But I haven't had any luck finding Constanzia on my own, and I got to thinking that I could use the publicity to my advantage."

"Publicity isn't always a good thing, Sofia. Did it occur to you that McIntosh is about to be besieged by women who claim their name is Constanzia?"

She laughed the same laugh that had warmed him since his father had brought her into their lives. Tony had been a six-year-old boy desperately in need of a mother. His father, widowed for almost that long, had needed a wife. Sofia had only been twenty, but she'd fulfilled both roles beautifully. Tony still thought she'd given his late father far more than he'd deserved.

Tony would have gladly called her "Mom," but she'd always insisted he refer to her as "Sofia." She said she never wanted him to forget that the woman who'd given birth to him had loved him with all her heart, even if he didn't remember her.

"I hardly think Constanzias will storm the town, Tony. I only gave away the one daughter."

"And how much money have you given away since you won the lottery?"

"I really can't say."

Tony couldn't either, and that was the crux of the problem. He'd fled the stifling environment of McIntosh for Michigan State as soon as he was old enough for college, found excuses not to come home for the summer, settled in Seattle after graduation and had only returned to Ohio for brief visits since.

Even after his father died of a sudden heart attack two years ago, Tony could justify living apart from Sofia. She was still a young woman, her life was in McIntosh and she'd visited him often in Seattle.

A one-dollar lottery ticket she'd bought on a whim after stopping for bottled water at the 7-Eleven had changed everything.

Sofia had beaten fourteen-million-to-one odds by predicting the six correct numbers in the Super Lotto. As the single winner, the ten-million dollar jackpot was hers and hers alone.

The irony that Sofia was the one who'd gotten rich quick didn't escape Tony. She'd all but supported their family single-handedly while he was growing up. His father had worked sporadically, persisting in the mistaken belief that one of his wacky inventions would make them rich.

Sofia's stroke of luck had set Tony's mind at ease about her future. Her lump-sum cash payment was just over three and a half million after federal and state taxes, enough for her to quit her job and be set for life.

But then the reports had started filtering in from his high school friend Will Sandusky, who still lived in McIntosh.

Sofia, it seemed, was a soft touch. So far she'd doled out money to a couple who planned to start a business making custom chocolates, paid off a stranger's mortgage and sent her friend on a Caribbean anniversary cruise. And now she was inviting trouble.

At this rate, she'd lose her newfound fortune before a few years were out.

Tony rubbed his forehead to ward off a brewing headache. "Sofia, you really don't see a problem here?"

"Is everything all right, Tony?" His girlfriend Ellen Fitzsimmons stuck her beautiful blond head around the door frame, her question drowning out his stepmother's reply.

She held a wine goblet in her right hand, and the overhead light caught the rich red hue of the merlot. It reminded him that he'd originally intended to break out a bottle of champagne to cap off an evening that had begun at a trendy French restaurant he'd booked a week in advance.

"Just a second, Sofia," he told his stepmother. He covered the receiver, futilely wishing Ellen had stayed in the living room. "Everything's fine, Ellen. I'll be just a few more minutes."

She hesitated, but then left the room on three-inch heels, the skirt of her dress swirling around her slender legs. Tony waited until she was gone to speak into the receiver. "I'll tell you what the problem is. Fake Constanzias who'll want a piece of your fortune."

"Tony, dear, it's not like I won a Powerball jackpot." Sofia sounded amused. "And there aren't that many women named Constanzia."

"We talked about this when the private investigator couldn't find out anything, remember? He said the adoptive parents might not have kept the name Constanzia."

"He didn't know that for sure. Besides, I have to take the chance. I don't have much information to go on."

"You're inviting pretenders."

"But I'll know if someone's trying to put one over on me. I have a picture of her in my head, Tony. When I close my eyes, I can almost see what she looks like."

Tony's head throbbed, and he rubbed his forehead with two fingers. "When, Sofia? You've been looking for Constanzia since I was in college. The P.I. I hired couldn't find her. What makes you so sure she'll show up?"

"Besides the power of publicity?" she asked, then answered herself. "I have faith."

"Do you know how vulnerable that faith makes you to an impostor?"

"If it'll make you happy, dear, I'll ask Constanzia to show me her driver's license."

"It's easy to get a fake ID," he said, trying not to sound frustrated. He knew how much finding Constanzia meant to Sofia. Hell, there was nothing he wanted more for her. But if a top-notch P.I. couldn't locate her, chances were slight that a mention on a television program would. "Anybody with access to the Internet can call up a dozen sites that will do it for you."

"Oh, Tony. You're being dramatic. Do you honestly believe somebody would pretend to be my daughter just because I have a little money?"

He stifled a groan at her definition of multimillions as a "little" money. "Yes, I do believe that."

Her sigh was audible even over the phone line. "I wish you weren't so cynical, Tony."

"I wish you weren't so trusting."

"Let's not argue. I see you so seldom that even our time on the phone is precious to me. Have I told you lately that I miss you?"

"I miss you, too," he said while he faced the inevitable. He needed to go back to McIntosh to make sure a fraud didn't worm her way into Sofia's life. He felt confident he could run off most of the pretenders with a show of bluster. And as a last resort, there was always DNA testing. He took a deep breath, then forced out the words. "In fact, it's time I paid you a visit."

Even as he made the declaration, he knew he'd used the wrong word. This wouldn't be a visit, but an indefinite stay.

His stomach twisted at the thought. He'd worked hard to escape the place where the shadow of his fabulously unsuccessful father hung over him like a dark curtain.

And he'd succeeded. He made a very good living running an online security company featuring a protocol he'd developed to verify the identities of remote users. The company was so successful, the college friend he'd hired to help run the business had been pushing him to expand.

While Tony couldn't stay away from his Seattle headquarters indefinitely, he'd been itching to take some time to redesign the company's Web site. And he could run Security Solutions from anywhere as long as he had Internet access. Including McIntosh.

"A visit from you would be lovely." Sofia paused. "As long as you realize I know you're coming to McIntosh to keep an eye on me."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"If playing watchdog is what it will take to get you here, I can live with it," she said agreeably.

He talked to his stepmother for another five minutes in which she deftly sidestepped his questions about her finances. She was especially evasive about the local financial planner she'd insisted

on hiring instead of the one Tony had found for her in Columbus. One more thing to check up on, he thought.

He reluctantly rejoined Ellen in the living room when he hung up, not looking forward to the coming conversation.

She'd crossed one leg over the other, and her slim gold ankle bracelet glinted in the soft light of the living room. She gazed up at him through expertly made-up lashes. Even though her wineglass was half-full, her pink-tinted lipstick looked fresh.

"Can I top off your glass?" Her musical voice was as perfect as the rest of her. They'd been dating for seven months, ever since she'd approached him at the health club they both used. His initial impression of her, as a woman who went after what she wanted, had turned out to be correct.

"No, thanks. I need to make it an early night."

Her perfectly shaped eyebrows lifted in question. She had every right to expect that this Saturday night, as countless others before it, would end in his bed. Sundays, they usually spent together.

"Has something happened? Is that why you took so long on the phone?"

He sat down next to her on the buttery-soft leather sofa in front of a fireplace that didn't blaze and filled her in on his conversation with Sofia, ending with his plan to return to McIntosh.

"Is that really necessary, Tony?" she asked. "Sofia's forty-one. That's only fourteen years older than you. She can take care of herself."

He pressed his lips together, wondering how best to explain. Ellen would understand better if she knew Sofia, but he'd somehow failed to get them together.

"You don't know her, Ellen. She has a big heart and a trusting nature. Not a good combination for somebody who just came into millions of dollars."

"But you were just there last month."

"Last month she hadn't announced on television that she was looking for her daughter," he said.

She set her wine goblet on the glass top of his coffee table, then crossed her arms over her chest. "How long will you be gone?"

"Try to understand, Ellen." He laid a hand on her arm, which felt cool to the touch. "I need to stay as long as Sofia needs me."

"But I thought you hated McIntosh. Didn't you tell me that leaving was all you could think about when you lived there?"

Now wasn't the time to confide that even the three days he'd spent in McIntosh after Sofia won the lottery had been too long. He composed his words carefully. "How I feel about McIntosh and how I feel about my stepmother are different things."

"So you're going to let things here slide? What about expanding your company? And the house? At that price, it won't stay on the market for long."

He'd forgotten about the sprawling, contemporary house until this moment. It needed a new roof and a new heating system, but its spectacular views of the Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains made it a bargain.

"There will be other houses," he said.

She got gracefully to her feet. Her blue eyes locked with his. "In my experience, Tony, if you don't seize your opportunities when the moment is right, you lose them."

After she was gone, Tony went into his bedroom, reached into the pocket of his pants and pulled out a small black velvet box. He snapped it open, removed an oval-cut, one-carat diamond ring and held it up to the light so that it sparkled.

He'd been carrying the diamond around for the better part of two weeks, the same length of time he'd kept the champagne in the refrigerator.

He shut the ring back in the box, opened his sock drawer and tossed the box inside next to a blank application for season tickets to the Seattle Supersonics pro basketball games. It would have to stay there until he returned from McIntosh.

THE BEAUTIFUL rolling countryside of McIntosh and Sofia Donatelli's heart-tugging plea replayed in Kaylee's mind at odd moments over the next week, but her own predicament was much more pressing.

Joey's tummy ache had not been caused by too many hot dogs but by a lingering stomach flu the pediatrician claimed wasn't serious. That was a matter of opinion.

The restaurant where she was a waitress provided a sorely deficient benefits package. Not only had she been forced to pay fifty percent of the doctor's bill out of her own shallow pocket, but she'd lost tips by staying home to care for Joey.

Not that the tips had been all that great since Dawn's departure forced her to change to an earlier shift. Even if Joey hadn't gotten ill, she needed to face the fact that they could no longer afford to live in Fort Lauderdale.

She'd spent the last few nights agonizing over where they could go. The inescapable conclusion was her father's house in Houston that she'd fled while still a teenager.

Kaylee had doubts over whether they'd be welcome, but last night she had swallowed her pride and telephoned, only to get the answering machine. So far, her father hadn't called her back.

For Joey's sake, she tried to shove aside her worries. Her forced smile strained the corners of her mouth after she and Joey got out of the serviceable ten-year-old Honda she'd bought used five years ago.

"What do you want for dinner, sport?" she asked as she opened the mailbox in front of her duplex and took out a stack of envelopes and junk mail.

She'd picked up Joey from school ten minutes ago and worried that his color still wasn't right. Had her boss's insistence that she not miss another day of work caused her to rush his return?

"Fish sticks," he said.

She hid a groan. He'd eat fish sticks seven days a week if she let him. But at least they were cheap and easy to prepare.

"Yummy, yummy, yummy. Joey wants fish sticks in his tummy," she said, ruffling his thick hair.

He groaned. "I'm not three, Mom."

"Too bad. When you were three, you laughed at my jokes even if they were bad."

"They're bad," he agreed readily.

She covered her heart with her hand. "You wound me," she said dramatically.

Joey giggled, that high-pitched boyish noise that never failed to warm her heart.

"Got you," she said.

He giggled again. She ushered him from the mugginess of the late afternoon into the duplex, which was only slightly cooler because she kept the thermostat on a high setting during the day to save on electricity.

Had she really been living here for six years? It seemed impossible but her rapidly growing son constituted proof of how quickly the time had passed.

Still, she could barely believe that almost seven years had passed since she'd ditched her high school classes and spent the day at the mall charging purchases to the credit card she'd stolen from her mother's purse. She'd felt completely justified because her mother had grounded her for some reason she couldn't remember but at the time seemed grossly unfair.

Night had fallen when she finally returned home to find her father sitting in his favorite recliner with the TV off and the lights out. His voice had been steady when he told her he'd given up trying to track her down hours ago.

She remembered the fingernails of her right hand digging into her thigh as he went on to say her mother had collapsed that morning while waiting in line at the post office. She'd probably been dead before she hit the floor.

Following her father's lead, Kaylee hadn't cried. Neither had she told him her last words to her mother.

After the funeral, things had gone downhill fast. Without her mother around telling her what to do, Kaylee had done what she pleased. Within a month, she'd bagged her senior year and run off to Florida. Then she'd gotten pregnant.

A kind social worker had gotten Kaylee a bed in a home for unwed mothers run by a charitable organization that also helped her get her GED. If not for the stroke of fate that had landed Dawn in the same home, Kaylee would have made the biggest mistake of her life.

As the two girls had cried together over the children they'd never see grow up, somehow their tears had nourished their own emergence into adulthood. Then Dawn had come up with the radical, wonderful idea that they live together and help each other raise their babies.

And so they had, a situation that had worked out beautifully until Dawn had fallen in love. Kaylee owed Dawn more than she could ever repay so she'd tried to be happy for her. And she was. But that didn't stop her from being sad for herself.

Not because Kaylee craved a man of her own—she'd learned the hard way that romantic entanglements could cause more problems than they solved—but because she'd lost her family.

Kaylee crossed the main room to the controls on the wall, turning the air conditioning up but only far enough that they wouldn't break a sweat. She hoped.

She banished thoughts of Dawn, who she'd assured just yesterday over the phone that she was doing well, and concentrated on her greatest joy: her son.

She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat that the old memories had formed. She hadn't truly recognized how badly she'd treated her own mother until she became a mother herself.

"What did you do in school today, Joe-Joe?"

In answer, the child knelt beside the backpack he'd dumped on the floor, opened it and took out a piece of paper.

Joey was a surprisingly good artist with a keen eye for the physical characteristics that made a person an individual. He'd drawn two people holding hands, and she clearly recognized them as herself and Joey.

"Miss Jan said to draw the people in my family," he explained.

Kaylee forced herself to smile even though the starkness of the picture struck her. There was no Dawn, no Monica, no Aunt Lilly, no Grandpa Paul, no father—and no background. She and Joey existed in a vacuum against a backdrop of stark white. She searched for something positive to say.

"Is my little boy really this big already?" She tapped the picture he'd drawn of himself. His head was level with her shoulder, the size of a boy twice his age.

He rolled his eyes and affected a grown-up tone. "I'm already six years old."

"Yes, you are." She smiled tenderly, because he was growing up far too fast. "Mind if I put your picture up on the fridge?"

He shook his head, and she fastened the drawing to the refrigerator with a colorful magnet he'd painted in art class and given her for Mother's Day. It joined a gallery that included a yellow dinosaur, a purple puppy and a mystery animal with the body of a dachshund and the head of an eagle.

"Can I turn on the TV?" Joey asked.

"Go ahead, honey. But just till dinner."

Trying not to sigh, Kaylee took the pack of fish sticks from the freezer and popped eight of the frozen sticks into the oven. Then she set a pot of water to boil and found a box of macaroni and cheese in the lazy Susan.

Betty Crocker, she was not. But then she'd never paid attention when her mother tried to teach her to cook. She'd never even made a lunch to bring to school. Her mother had done that for her until high school, when she preferred to eat as little as possible and pocket the rest of the money for more important things. Like an occasional joint or the wine and beer she could talk an older friend into buying for her.

She dumped the macaroni into the boiling water, listening with half an ear to make sure the cartoon Joey had turned on wasn't geared for adults.

The irony of her life of responsibility didn't escape her. She couldn't remember the last time she'd smoked a joint, and she barely touched alcohol. She, who'd reveled in the wrong things, was determined to set an example for her son by doing the right ones.

While she waited for the macaroni to cook, she separated her mail into two stacks. Bills in one, junk mail in another. She was almost through sorting when the phone rang.

"Kaylee, it's Lilly." Her younger sister's drawling voice, rich with the sound of Texas, came over the line.

"Lilly!" Younger than Kaylee by six years, Lilly lived at home with their father while finishing her sophomore year at Houston Community College. "How's college? Are you through with the semester yet?"

"Almost. It's exam week, and I can't wait for it to be over. Do you know how much you have to study in college?"

Kaylee barely stopped herself from lecturing her sister on the importance of a college education. Lilly was still young enough not to listen to reason, even if it came from somebody with first-hand knowledge of how hard it was to make ends meet without higher education. "What are you going to do this summer?"

"Same thing I do every summer. Work on my tan while lifeguarding at the community center," she said. "Listen. I can't talk long because I'm meeting a friend for dinner, but I wanted to let you know that Dad said you and Joey are welcome here."

Kaylee's jaw tensed. If her father really wanted her and Joey in his house, wouldn't he have called her back himself? "Did he offer, Lilly? Or did you talk him into it?"

The pause at the other end of the line was too lengthy to be meaningless. "Don't be silly, Kaylee. You know Dad. He's always been there for us."

Lilly's statement wasn't entirely accurate. Paul Carter was a dependable, hardworking plumber who'd ably supported the family. But he hadn't cared enough to intercede in the stormy arguments Kaylee had with her mother. Neither had he come after Kaylee when she'd run away to Florida. And he still hadn't seen his grandson.

To be fair, her father always sprang for Lilly's plane ticket when her sister visited them. Lilly relayed that he'd pay for their plane tickets if Kaylee and Joey wanted to visit them in Houston, but Kaylee hadn't asked and he hadn't offered himself.

"Let us know when you're coming, okay?" Lilly said. "I've got to run."

Kaylee hung up the phone, more unsure than ever that she and Joey should go to Houston.

But she had to decide something soon. Her meager savings were dwindling rapidly. Her father would probably help her out, but she hadn't once asked him for money in six years and didn't intend to start now. If not for Joey, she'd never have asked if they could stay at his house temporarily.

She went back to sorting the mail, stopping abruptly when she came across a letter from the Florida Parole Commission. A lump of unease clogged her throat. Not bothering with her letter opener, Kaylee ripped open the envelope, pulled out a single sheet of white paper and read the bad news.

A hearing had been scheduled that could result in Rusty Collier being granted parole. The hearing was next week.

Short fingers pulled at her skirt. "Mommy, what's wrong?"

She stared down at Joey's dear, little face and tried to think. Even if Rusty did get parole, it didn't mean he would try to find them. He'd only contacted her twice since Joey had been born, then had given up when she'd asked him to stop calling.

But the very possibility that he might track them down was one more strike against Houston. Never mind that the terms of Rusty's parole would prohibit him from leaving Florida.

"Nothing's wrong, honey." She got down on her haunches and looked into his eyes. "But I have a surprise for you."

Joey brightened. "M&M's? A Matchbox car?"

She smoothed the baby-fine hair back from his forehead. It was an unusual shade. Lighter than brown but darker than blond. On more than one occasion, she'd heard it described as rust-colored. Like the hair of the man who'd fathered him.

"Not that kind of a surprise. A bigger one. We're going to have an adventure."

"Like Winnie the Pooh?"

A wave of love swept over her like a warm wind. She nodded, glad that Joey didn't yet consider the beloved character beneath his new maturity level. "Exactly like that. Is there a story called *Winnie the Pooh and the Move*?"

Skepticism replaced the eagerness on Joey's face. He shook his head.

"Well, imagine if there were such a story. Imagine if Winnie and Tigger and Christopher Robin moved."

"In the Hundred Acre Wood?"

"No. Somewhere else. Somewhere better." Ignoring his continued skepticism, she kept on talking. "It'll be fun. First we'll pack up everything, and then we'll get in the car, just you and me. We'll drive away from Florida and start over someplace else."

"When?"

"Soon. Maybe even the day after tomorrow."

Worry lines appeared between his brows. "How 'bout school?"

Kaylee hadn't thought of that and did some quick mental calculations. It was mid-May. The last day of school wasn't even two weeks away. "School's almost out for the summer, honey. It won't matter if you finish a couple days early."

Although Joey didn't frown, he didn't smile, either. "Where?"

The lush countryside that had charmed her from the television broadcast played like a travelogue through her mind. She imagined Sofia Donatelli standing among the blooming apple trees, beckoning to her with a smile and a bent finger, and made her decision.

"We're going to Ohio. A place called McIntosh."

CHAPTER THREE

MCINTOSH WAS all Kaylee had imagined it would be. The gently sloping hills. The trees bursting with spring color. The open spaces. The crisp blue skies with the promise of summer in the warming air.

Everything would have been perfect if only she had a job, child care and a place to live. Friends in town would have been nice. Family would have been better.

If she hadn't panicked when she'd gotten that letter from the Florida Parole Commission, she would have formulated a better plan.

At eighteen, she'd thought it exciting to leave home for the unknown. But packing Joey and everything they owned into her car and heading for Ohio hadn't felt like an adventure. It felt like a risk.

She'd temporarily taken care of housing by getting a room at a hotel on the edge of town, but the most that could be said for it was that it was clean.

Before they could look for a more permanent place to live, she had to find work. And she needed to do it with a six-year-old in tow because there was nobody she could ask to babysit.

She pulled into a parking space on the appropriately named Main Street and got out of the car with Joey, feeling as though she'd been plopped down in the middle of a storybook.

A recent rain had wiped everything clean, causing the spring hues to seem more vibrant. The street was awash with color, the white clouds puffy overhead in a cerulean sky. They walked up a slight hill past a beauty shop, a bookstore, a general store and a shoe-repair shop while she searched for an address.

"Hey, Mom." Joey pointed a forefinger at a tall tree that sported a profusion of tiny, red flowers against its smooth gray bark. "That tree looks like it has chicken pox."

"Yeah, sport," she said. "It does."

The trees were almost always green in South Florida, the temperature forever warm, the traffic always busy. McIntosh was a welcome change. Thirty seconds could pass before a car went by, but the sidewalks, though not busy, were far from empty.

"Look at that." Joey sprang away from her, ran to the base of the tree and scooped up something. He came back to her side holding a very small squirming toad covered with warts. "Isn't he cool?"

She backed up a step. "You better put him down. He'll give you warts."

"They said on TV that's a mitt."

"A myth," she corrected. "But even if he won't give you warts, he looks like a baby. You better let him go so he can find his mother."

He rolled his eyes. "He was hatched from an egg."

Kids who watched nature shows on TV were tougher to manipulate, Kaylee thought. "Just let him go, Joey."

Joey groaned but turned away from her and scooted down. An elderly man who was passing by met Kaylee's eye and greeted her, something else she wasn't used to.

She and Joey continued walking until she found the address for Sandusky's, a small grocery store with a full-service butcher shop. The clerk at the hotel had told her that the store was looking for a cashier.

"Now remember what we talked about, Joey." She bent down to his level. "You need to be quiet while I'm talking to the people about a job."

Joey kept by her side while she found a clerk and asked to speak to the owner. He appeared from the back of the shop a few moments later wearing a white butcher's apron that didn't detract from his appeal.

If she'd been twenty years older, she would have looked more than once. He had thick brown hair, pleasant features, kind hazel eyes and a nice smile. "I'm Art Sandusky. Can I help you?"

"Hi," she said brightly. "My name's Kaylee Carter, and I'm here about the cashier's job you advertised in the *McIntosh Weekly*."

A tremendous crash from the next aisle interrupted whatever he'd been about to say. His brows drew together. "I wonder what that was."

Kaylee looked wildly about for Joey, didn't find him and had a pretty good guess. Together she and Art Sandusky rounded the corner of the next aisle. Her son stood beside broken pickle jars and a young girl in an apron. The smell of dill and vinegar was nearly overpowering.

"What happened?" Art Sandusky asked.

"The kid asked me if I wanted to see something cool. Then he reached in his pocket and pulled out a toad." The girl shuddered. "It jumped on me."

"It didn't mean nothing by it," Joey said. The toad leaped into view and Joey scrambled away in pursuit.

The job hunt didn't go much better after that. Art Sandusky was a doll about the breakage, insisting it had been an accident and refusing to accept payment. But he'd also hired a cashier three days ago.

Kaylee's next stop was a deli-style restaurant that hadn't advertised for help and turned out not to need any. The owner probably wouldn't have hired her anyway after Joey bumped into a waiter carrying a tray of drinks. Two customers got drenched, but Joey came away dry as desert sand.

"Do you know of anyplace else that might be looking?" she asked the tired-looking man who emerged from the kitchen to clean up the mess.

"You might try Nunzio's," he said as he swished the mop back and forth. "It's the only other restaurant in town with table service."

Kaylee's palms grew damp and her heart sped up. Her impulse had been to make Nunzio's her first stop, but she'd deliberately steered clear of the restaurant where Sofia Donatelli had once worked.

Getting established before confronting Sofia had seemed like the smartest plan, but now she needed to be a realist. She couldn't stay in McIntosh for long without a job. Applying for a waitress job at Nunzio's made perfect sense.

Her heart raced when she grabbed her son's hand, because every step she took brought her closer to the woman who could be her mother.

"C'mon, Joe-Joe," Kaylee said. "We're going to Nunzio's."

ANOTHER DAY, another impostor. This one had brought her son along.

Tony saw her as soon as he entered Nunzio's, the most logical place in McIntosh to meet with a stranger. The place not only smelled wonderful—a mouthwatering mixture of tomato sauce, garlic bread and spices—but the homey atmosphere was inviting. Checkered red-and-white tablecloths covered the booths and tables, and scenic vistas of Italy decorated the walls.

Tony had suggested meeting at three o'clock, because it was between lunch and dinner. The only people in the restaurant were an elderly couple sitting at a corner table near the entrance, a young boy of about five or six and the woman.

The woman sat with the boy in a rear booth, although the latest in the string of females he mentally referred to as "the Connies" hadn't said anything about bringing her son.

Yesterday's Connie had been a petite bleached blonde he'd frightened off with surprising ease. When Sofia was in the restroom, he'd threatened to investigate her background for past crimes and outstanding warrants. She'd bolted when he got to the part about pressing charges against her for fraud.

Although Tony had been in McIntosh for nearly a week, this would be his first meeting with a Connie without Sofia present. He'd set this one up on the sly, wanting to spare his stepmother more disappointment.

At least this Connie looked the part.

Long, wavy hair more black than brown set off by an orangey knit sweater. Eyes he could tell were nearly that dark even from across the room. Features that didn't fit America's cookie-cutter notion of beauty but that Tony found much more intriguing. Even the Mediterranean cast of her skin was right.

By contrast the boy looked all-American, from his tousled mop of brownish hair to his inability to sit still. The latest Connie had been smart enough to seat the boy on her side of the booth with her body hemming him in.

She looked up, and he realized he'd been staring for a good thirty seconds. Their eyes connected, and his body reacted with an unexpected tug of lust.

He frowned. The Connie was most likely married. Even if she wasn't, he had serious questions about her character. He'd place the odds of her being Sofia's daughter at a million to one. The odds were probably higher that she already knew that.

Shoving aside his momentary lapse, he walked purposefully toward her. He couldn't miss the slight widening of her eyes when he didn't stop until he reached their booth.

"I'm Tony. Mind if I sit down?"

Without waiting for permission, he slid into the red vinyl seat opposite them. Her mouth dropped open, but the little guy piped up before she could speak.

“I’m Joey.” He had a chocolate milk mustache and a cowlick that caused his short hair to spring up in unexpected directions. “Wanna see a toad?”

Shock appeared on his mother’s face, infusing it with life. “Joey! I thought you let the toad go.”

“I did,” the boy said with an unhappy pout. “But I bet I could find him again.”

“I’d have liked to see him. I used to catch toads all the time when I was a kid.” Tony stuck out a hand to the boy. “Is it okay if I call you Joe? You look more like a Joe than a Joey.”

“Sure.” The boy beamed at him, displaying twin dimples that made him look like an imp. He placed his small hand in Tony’s and shook with surprising firmness. Then he grinned at his mom. “Hey, Mom, he’s cool.”

Tony transferred his gaze to the Connie. Her features were even more intriguing up close. Her nose was long with a little bump on the bridge, her cheekbones high, her lips full, her front two teeth separated by a very slight gap. Her lashes weren’t particularly long but they were thick and as dark as her finely arched brows.

His eyes dipped to the bare ring finger of her left hand. When they returned to her face, her midnight-dark eyes narrowed.

He got the distinct impression she didn’t agree with her son’s assessment of his coolness. Tough. She should understand straight off the bat that she couldn’t con him.

“Let’s not waste time,” he said. “Tell me your story.”

“Who are you?” she asked.

“He already told you, Mom,” the boy interjected helpfully. “He’s Tony.”

“I thought Mr. Nunzio’s first name was Frankie.”

“It is,” Tony said, wondering where she was going with this.

“If you’re not the restaurant owner, are you the manager?”

“No. Why—” he began.

“Then are you hitting on me?” She looked him straight in the eyes.

So much for presenting a can’t-con-me front. He thought he’d disguised that first visceral reaction, but she’d recognized it and called him on it. Damn.

“He’s not hitting you, Mom,” Joe said. “If he did, I’d hit him back.”

“Thank you, Joe-Joe.” She sent a grateful look at her son before casting a decidedly cooler one at Tony. “Look, I’m flattered. Really I am. And I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t have time for this. I’m here about a job that I really need.”

“Whoa.” He put up a hand. “I’m not hitting on you.”

“He’s not, Mom,” Joe agreed.

“We talked on the phone. I’m the guy you were supposed to...” His voice trailed off as a possibility occurred to him. “You’re not one of the Connies, are you?”

Delicate frown lines appeared on her brow. “Excuse me?”

He rephrased the question. “Is your name Connie?”

She shook her head, her dark hair rustling. “It’s Kaylee. Kaylee Carter.”

“And I’m Joey... I mean Joe Carter,” her son piped up.

Tony closed his eyes, winced and put a hand to his brow even as relief swept through him. “I owe you an apology. I thought you were someone else.”

He started to tell her he’d been weeding through letters with his lottery-winning stepmother to decide which of the Connies could be legitimate before setting up a meet. But it suddenly seemed like too much information.

The cell phone clipped to his pocket vibrated, interrupting his train of thought. He unhooked it, checked the number and recognized it as belonging to the Connie.

“Excuse me. I’ve got to take this.” He got up and walked to an empty booth nearby.

He felt Kaylee's eyes on him as he listened to the Connie say she'd changed her mind and didn't want to reschedule. No surprise there, considering he'd made it clear she had to get past him before she could get to Sofia.

He hung up, reconnected the phone and walked back to the booth. Kaylee watched him warily.

"I'm really sorry for the misunderstanding." He didn't sit down this time. "Let me make it up to you. Let me..."

He clamped down on his teeth before he could finish the sentence...let me take you to dinner. Yeah, like that would convince her he hadn't been hitting on her.

"...put in a good word for you with the owner."

"You know the owner?" She sounded hopeful.

"I grew up here in McIntosh so there aren't many people I don't know."

"I'm waiting to talk to him. If you could put in a good word, I'd appreciate it very much. Joey and I, we just moved here and I really need a job." She lifted her chin. "Not that I can't get one myself but a good word can't hurt."

He nodded, ready to promise her anything. Her combination of bravado and susceptibility touched a familiar chord inside him. He'd once left everything he knew behind to go off to live in a strange city. He understood what it was like to feel vulnerable.

The swinging door at the back of the restaurant banged open, and Frankie Nunzio emerged. He scanned the restaurant, spotted Tony and grinned.

A small, wiry man on the down side of fifty who moved with the energy of someone half his age, Frankie reached Tony in seconds and vigorously pumped his hand. "Hey, Tony. What? You coming in here every day now?"

"Can't stay away, but you'll be glad I came in today because I found a waitress for you." He nodded toward Kaylee. "Frankie, this is Kaylee Carter and her son, Joe. Kaylee and Joe, Frankie Nunzio."

Frankie shook Kaylee's hand every bit as enthusiastically as he had Tony's. "You're the woman waiting to see me?"

"Yes."

"Have you waitressed before?"

"I have six years of experience."

"Then I'll give you a try. I need somebody from ten to two six days a week. We're closed Sundays. Let's see. It's Friday. Can you start Monday?"

"You mean I'm hired? Just like that?"

"Think of next week as your trial run. But, hey, if you're a friend of Tony's, I'm sure you'll do fine. What do you say?"

Something wasn't right. Tony could see it in the set of Kaylee's shoulders, the slight tightening of her mouth.

"Don't you have anything full-time?" she asked.

"Not right now," Frankie said. "But the restaurant business is fluid. Something could come up. So are we on for Monday?"

She hesitated, then affixed a smile. "Yes. Provided I can find somebody to take care of my son."

"Try Anne Gudzinski," Frankie advised. "She runs a day care a couple blocks from here. After I get some papers for you to fill out, Tony can walk you over there and introduce you. Right, Tony?"

"Be happy to," he said, noting that her smile of thanks seemed distracted.

He kept her son occupied with a game of paper football while she filled out the paperwork. Tony taught Joe how to flick the "football" across the table with his fingertips.

The little boy screamed, "Score!" whenever the paper football sailed off the table and into Tony's lap, not grasping that touchdowns only counted if it barely hung over the side.

When Kaylee was finally ready to walk to Anne's day-care center, Tony could tell that something was still bothering her.

She was tall, he'd guess at least five foot nine. Her height helped her project an air of independence but again he sensed vulnerability. And damn if he didn't already like her.

An image of Ellen flashed through his mind, but he dismissed his guilt. He owed Kaylee Carter for mistaking her for someone else and acting like a jerk. He couldn't deny that he found her attractive, but his association with her was purely innocent.

Somebody grabbed his hand, but it wasn't Kaylee. Firmly holding onto his mother with his other hand, Joe launched himself in the air.

"Let's go," Joe said.

Some of the strain left Kaylee's face as she gazed down at her son. She lifted her eyes to exchange an amused look with Tony over Joe's head.

Nothing about the moment was suggestive, but Tony again experienced that unexpected pull of desire. Normal enough. He was a healthy male, and she was an attractive woman.

It didn't mean he intended to do anything about it.

ANNE GUDZINSKI'S day-care center turned out to be a large white Victorian house with black awnings on the windows and a wide, inviting porch.

If not for the color, Kaylee thought it would have looked like a gingerbread house transported to real life.

Nothing was fanciful about how much Anne charged for child care. Anne, a pretty woman with short blond hair and so much pep she'd probably led cheers in high school, explained the cost accounted for a low ratio of children to day-care workers.

Kaylee approved of the rationale, but her wallet didn't. She'd mentally crunched numbers and worried that she couldn't survive in McIntosh on a part-timer's salary.

"Hey, Tony. Hey, Mom." Joey's excited voice broke into her thoughts. He'd chattered nonstop during the short walk to the day-care center and it appeared as though he might keep on talking all the way back to her car. "Watch this."

Holding tightly to both of their hands, her son launched himself into the air. "I'm not a bird. I'm not a plane. I'm Super Joe."

At the apex of his jump, he let go and went airborne for a split second before landing on the ground and running ahead of them.

Tony's deep laugh shot out of him. Despite her worries, Kaylee found that she enjoyed the sound.

"Look," Joey yelled, pointing at something on the sidewalk. "A grasshopper!"

He lunged at it, missed, lunged again, missed again. There went Tony's laugh, so low and full-bodied it was capable of making a grown woman shiver.

With his height, thick black hair that sprang back from a wide forehead with heavy brows and hint of a shadow darkening his jaw, Tony had the look of a dark and dangerous man. But she already had a strong sense that impression was an illusion.

He laughed too easily and got along with Joey too well. His clothes, khakis and a navy rib-knit pullover, were casual but expensively cut.

Unlike some of the male customers who used to try to make time with her in Fort Lauderdale, he knew when to back off. He'd been about to ask her to dinner earlier, but held off.

She habitually turned down the men who asked her out and would have refused him, too. The last time she'd been on a date had been six months ago when Dawn had overheard a customer ask her out and engineered it so she could go. The man had been nice enough, but not worth the time away from Joey.

Kaylee sensed a date with Tony would be different. He was self-confident, polished and probably successful. He also possessed the most prized quality of all: he liked Joey.

It figured she'd meet him now when her life was in disarray. She had more important things to accomplish in McIntosh than indulge herself with the first hot guy who came along.

But this wasn't just any guy, she reminded herself. This was the guy who'd helped her get a job and line up day care.

"Thank you for today," she said. "I don't know what I'd have done without you."

"Don't mention it," he said, then picked up a thread of conversation Joey had interrupted earlier when he'd spotted a squirrel scampering up a utility pole. "You told me you grew up in Houston and moved to Fort Lauderdale. But you never did say how you ended up in McIntosh."

She tried not to tense up at what was an innocent question. He couldn't possibly know she was both running away from and toward something. Nobody did.

Why not tell him?

The thought popped into her head and stuck. It would be wonderful to have a confidante. To talk over the threat Rusty Collier presented with somebody who was enough of a stranger that she didn't even know his full name. To confess that she was afraid to confront Sofia Donatelli with her crazy hope. To make her feel like she wasn't alone.

Her lips parted, but then she clamped them shut. She hadn't shared her hopes and fears with Dawn, who was closer to her than a sister. She couldn't air them to a man who was still a stranger.

"We needed a change," Kaylee said.

"Do you have friends here? Family?"

A startlingly clear image of Sofia Donatelli came to mind, and Kaylee bit the inside of her lip. "I just like it here," she said vaguely.

"What's to like?"

"Are you kidding?" She swept her hand to indicate the blossoming trees, the blue skies and the wide, quiet street, then breathed deeply of the clean air scented with fragrant blossoms. "It's like a little slice of heaven."

"That's what my father used to say," he muttered, not sounding pleased.

She cut her eyes at him. "And you don't agree?"

He shrugged. "I suppose it's pretty enough, but a small town like this doesn't have a lot to offer for someone who wants to make a success of themselves."

She thought that depended on your definition of success, but asked, "Then why do you live here?"

"I don't. I live in Seattle. I'm here for an extended visit."

A bird sang, and the driver of a passing car waved in greeting. She waved back, although she'd never seen the person before in her life.

"I just got here but I already know I don't want to leave," she said. "I think I could find everything I need right here to make me happy."

She mentally amended her statement. *If* she could make enough money to support herself and Joey. Her worry came back in force. She already had doubts about her ability to stay afloat and she had yet to figure housing costs into the equation.

"Hurry up, Mom," Joey called. He'd given up on the grasshopper and stood beside the car, waiting for them to catch up. "I want to play with Attila and Genghis."

Tony raised a questioning eyebrow as Kaylee took her key chain from her pocket and remotely unlocked the car.

"Attila and Genghis are snakes," she explained, then laughed when his eyebrow raised even higher. "They're characters in his GameBoy game."

She didn't add that the game was an old one she'd picked up at a store that sold used games. So far, Joey wasn't savvy enough about what was available to clamor for new ones.

She watched her son clamber into the car, then turned to Tony. She didn't want to say goodbye. The weekend stretched ahead of her: long, empty and filled with worry. But she'd been taking care of herself and Joey for a long time. She could manage. She pasted on a smile.

"Thank you again for your help." Her feet felt glued to the sidewalk, but she managed to start to turn away.

"Wait." He laid a hand on her shoulder. His touch was gentle, certainly not firm enough to stop her, but she froze. Warmth spread under her knit sweater in the spot where his hand rested.

She gazed up at him. A cloud that had momentarily blotted out the sun drifted lazily along with the wind and cast him in a shaft of light, making him look so virile she caught her breath.

It was nearly five o'clock, and the proverbial shadow darkened his jaw. She had the insane urge to rub her cheek against the stubble, to touch his slightly fuller lower lip with her fingertips to see if it was as soft as it looked.

Because she wore a pair of clunky black dress shoes, there was no more than two or three inches difference in their heights.

If he lowered his head, or she raised hers, their lips would meet. Their eyes locked. His were a light brown that reminded her of caramel. If he tried to kiss her, she'd let him. He exhaled, and she felt his breath warm against her mouth. Her breath snagged in her lungs.

"Have dinner with me this weekend," he urged.

She didn't have to think about her answer. "Yes."

His lips curved, and his mouth, with that sensuous lower lip, moved closer.

The horn of her car blared. She jumped, banging her forehead against his nose.

"Ow," he said, his hand going to the offended body part.

"Sorry," she said, rubbing her forehead.

They both turned toward the sound. Joey sat at the steering wheel, a playful grin on his face. She waved an admonishing, unsteady finger at him. He crawled into the passenger's seat and pressed his face flush against the window so his features looked distorted.

Tony laughed his intoxicating laugh. "That must be your son's way of making sure we don't forget about him. He's invited to dinner, too, by the way."

The magic had gone out of the moment, allowing Kaylee to think more clearly. She could easily make an excuse, begging off dinner on the grounds that she'd come to her senses.

"When?" she asked.

"How's tomorrow night? At about six o'clock."

"To be safe, we should make it a little later. I'm going to call a Realtor in the morning. Hopefully Joey and I can spend the afternoon looking for a place to live."

"Why don't you hold off on making that call and let me help you find a place?"

She blinked in surprise, then realized how little she knew about him. "Are you a Realtor?"

He shook his head. "I run a company called Security Solutions."

"You're a private eye?"

He laughed, touching her arm. Her body leaned toward his, seemingly of its own accord. "It's online security. I developed a protocol that verifies the identity of remote users."

"What does that mean in plain English?"

"It means the businesses that use my protocol can be sure the information they exchange online is secure, whether it be a transaction or a business plan."

"And in your spare time, you help single mothers find places to live?"

He grinned, showing even white teeth. "Exactly. I already told you, I grew up here. I've got connections. You can't afford to house hunt without me."

"You already know of a place for rent?" she guessed.

"I know the owner, too. Why don't I pick you up tomorrow around ten and I'll show it to you?"

The corners of his dark eyes crinkled, and she nearly staggered under the power of his smile. She could come to depend on a man like this in a hurry. Even though that would be unwise, she couldn't bring herself to refuse his help. Not when she wanted it so very much.

"All right. But I'd rather pick you up," she said. That way she'd have her car and some vestige of independence. "All I need is an address."

He gave it to her, and she committed it to memory. The horn blared again. Joey sat in the passenger seat doing a terrible job of looking innocent.

"I think the native is getting restless," she said and went around the car to the driver's side. She opened the door, then looked at him over the roof of the car and smiled. "This is crazy, but I don't even know your last name."

He smiled back. "It's Donatelli."

She might have staggered if she hadn't been holding on to the door frame. She felt like her body was on autopilot as she lowered herself into position behind the steering wheel and tried to process the new information.

Donatelli was a common Italian surname. Just because Tony shared it with Sofia Donatelli didn't necessarily mean he was the stepson she'd mentioned on the television broadcast.

But when she cross-checked the address Tony had given her in the white pages of the phone book, Kaylee already knew that Sofia's name would appear.

That meant Tony Donatelli wasn't merely a hot guy she'd met at a restaurant. He was a hot guy who could very well be her stepbrother.

CHAPTER FOUR

TONY WHISTLED to himself as he turned his rental car into the middle-class neighborhood where he'd grown up, already looking forward to seeing Kaylee and her son the next day.

He'd briefly considered asking her to dinner tonight before remembering that Sofia was planning a special meal. His stepmother seemed to think she had to make up for serving takeout fettuccini alfredo the night before, even though Nunzio's made the dish with a recipe she'd invented.

No matter. Tomorrow was soon enough.

He drove by modest brick houses with shingle roofs and yards that looked amazingly like they had twenty years ago. The Stewarts still needed to prune their trees, the Walkowskis' house could benefit from a paint job and the Pagioassis still had the best-kept lawn in town.

He didn't stop whistling until he drew even with the Medfords. Something was wrong. He did a double-take. The For Rent sign he'd seen yesterday was no longer there.

"Aw, hell," he said.

It figured that his friend Will, who happened to be a real estate agent, was out of town on a long weekend. But Sofia had contacts. Maybe she knew of another place for rent.

He parked, walked up the sidewalk and stepped over the automated doormat before unlocking the door and punching in a code to disable the new security system Sofia had installed.

All the while, he tried not to let the old memories blindside him. It was no use. They came rushing at him like a powerful wave, the same way they did every time he entered the house.

It was probably because of the silly doormat his father had invented. An elevated contraption with ground-level machinery, it was supposed to suction dirt off the soles of shoes through tiny holes in the mat. Most of the time, the holes were clogged.

Anthony Donatelli, Sr., had been dead for two years, but a part of Tony still expected him to appear and excitedly fill him in on his latest idea that would make them all rich.

The majority of the time, his father's ideas had been clunkers, but Tony had to concede his father had the seeds of a few ideas that had turned out to be moneymakers. For other people.

His father's predictions of striking it rich had been nothing but bluster. He'd always failed, either in the developing or marketing phase.

Tony used to wonder how Sofia could listen to his father blather about the Next Big Thing. He never understood why she'd cheerfully supported them while his father had dreamed away his days.

Tony rubbed at his forehead, trying to banish the memories.

"Sofia. I'm ho...here," he called.

"You don't have to break my eardrums, dear. I'm right here."

Sofia was descending the staircase dressed in a short-sleeved red sweater that complemented her Mediterranean coloring. She'd combed out her thick black hair so that it framed her face, added lip gloss to her naturally red lips and mascara to her already dark lashes. High heels worn under black slacks added inches to her height. The clothes were obviously new.

He whistled long and low. "Did I miss something? Do you have a date tonight?"

"No date." She spread her hands. "I'm running an errand, is all."

"Well, you look terrific. Like ten-million bucks."

She smiled at him and descended the rest of the stairs. Stopping in front of the mirror in the foyer, she fluffed her hair. "Charmer. Where have you been?"

He had no intention of causing her more heartache by telling her about the Connie who hadn't showed up at the restaurant. "Errands. Same as you."

"Mine won't take more than an hour. Then I'm coming straight home to cook you that special dinner."

"With the fortune you won, you should hire a cook."

She settled her hands on her hips and cocked her dark head. "I thought you didn't want me to spend my money."

"I don't want you to spend too much of your money on other people. I never said anything about not spending it on yourself."

"But I don't need much, Tony. I certainly don't need someone to cook for me, especially because I'm no longer working at the restaurant. Then what would I do?"

"Relax? Enjoy yourself?" he suggested.

"I'll relax tonight—while I'm cooking," she said and headed for the door.

"Sofia, wait."

She turned an inquisitive look on him.

"Do you know why the Medfords' house isn't for rent any longer?"

"Why, yes." She seemed surprised that he'd asked. "They found someone to rent it this morning. Why?"

He hesitated, then figured there was no harm in telling her. "I met a single mother and her son today and told her I'd help her find a place to live."

"Is she anybody I know?"

"She's new in town."

Sofia tilted her head to the side as she regarded him. Her forefinger tapped her bottom lip. "Is she pretty?"

He squirmed under her scrutiny. "I didn't notice."

She pointed at him. "You, my son, are a terrible liar."

"Okay. Yes, she's very attractive. But it's not like that. I already have a girlfriend."

"A girlfriend, not a wife."

"Ellen could be my wife some day."

Sofia pinned him with her gaze. "I didn't realize you were serious about her."

"We've been dating for almost a year."

"Time doesn't mean anything. I once knew a man who dated the same woman for sixteen years. Then he got stuck in the elevator with a woman who worked in his office building. He broke up with his girlfriend the next day. Three months later, he was married."

"Why are you telling me this?"

“If you’re having second thoughts about Ellen, it’s not too late to do something about it.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you’d met Ellen. She’s perfect. Smart, beautiful, talented, successful. Everything I could want in a wife.”

“Then why do you have a date with another woman tomorrow night?”

“I already told you. She doesn’t know anybody in town, so…” His voice trailed off. “How do you know I asked Kaylee to dinner? I told you I was going to help her find a house, not take her out.”

She patted him on the cheek. “A mother knows what a mother knows, Tony.”

He frowned, not liking the conclusion she’d reached. Even in high school, he’d never dated two girls at the same time. His buddy Will had made that mistake when they were in the eleventh grade and wound up with a black eye, courtesy of the first girl. The second girl had convinced all her friends to give him the silent treatment.

But Tony couldn’t deny there had been a moment in the street when he’d wanted to kiss Kaylee. He blotted out the memory.

“I’m only being friendly, Sofia. Kaylee’s new in town. She and her son don’t know anybody. I thought she could use some help, maybe somebody to talk to.”

Tony certainly had questions that he’d love to get answered. Why had she arrived in McIntosh with neither a job nor a place to stay? What did Joe’s father think of her relocating his son? What made her tick?

“Whatever you say,” Sofia said, but in a way that told him she didn’t believe his motives were as innocent as he’d portrayed them.

“So do you know of another place that might be for rent or not?”

“Not off the top of my head, but I do know the editor of the newspaper. The real estate classifieds don’t come out until Sunday, but I bet he’ll give me an advance copy.”

Tony bent down to kiss her soft cheek. She smelled like perfume and his childhood.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m a lucky guy to have you as a mother.”

Even if she had put doubts in his mind about exactly why he wanted to hang out with Kaylee.

SOFIA DONATELLI sat behind the steering wheel of her Volvo in a parking spot on Main Street with a view of Sandusky’s, too distracted to enjoy the new-car smell.

She wouldn’t have noticed Gertrude Skendrovich passing by on the sidewalk tightly clutching a bag from Baked Delights in one of her pudgy hands if Gertie hadn’t waved enthusiastically.

Sofia waved back, sorry that the sleek blue Volvo made her so easy to spot. She couldn’t regret splurging on the car. It performed splendidly in crash tests, a consideration of great importance for someone who’d lost her father in a car crash before she’d ever known him.

Gertie’s smile widened, as though delighted Sofia had acknowledged her.

Sofia was neither naive nor foolish. She hadn’t changed so much as the world around her had. There was no escaping that her life B.L., before the lottery, was different than it was A.L.

B.L., the curmudgeonly Gertie wouldn’t have raised her head let alone her hand. A.L., she was probably trying to ingratiate herself with Sofia so she could ask for money.

Word had already gotten out that Sofia was an easy mark. Maybe that’s why none of the letters the television station had forwarded from the Connies had sounded legitimate.

Tony had followed up on one of the more promising leads this afternoon, although he didn’t know she was aware of that. But why not let her stepson screen the phonies? If he’d interceded before she’d met the sweet little bleached-blond impostor, she might not have cried herself to sleep last night.

She wiped away a tear, one of many she’d shed for the daughter she didn’t know. She’d changed her mind about surrendering the infant while in the delivery room, but her mother said it was too late, that the adoption had already gone through.

Sofia blinked determinedly to dry her eyes. She’d think about her search for Constanzia later. Right now, she needed to find out why Art Sandusky had been avoiding her.

Wiping her damp palms on the legs of her lightweight black slacks, she determinedly climbed out of the Volvo and marched into Sandusky's. The cashier, a young woman with her blond hair in a ponytail, was new, saving Sofia from having to stop and make small talk.

The store was a grocery store/butcher shop that specialized in fine cuts of meat, which could be had at a counter that stretched the length of the back of the store.

The four aisles leading to it were narrow and packed with limited selections of bread, wine, cheese and just about every other ingredient that went into serving a nice dinner.

Sofia picked an empty aisle, which seemed the quickest path to Art Sandusky, but knew she'd made a mistake when a short, plump woman rounded the corner.

"Sofia! It's so wonderful to run into you."

"Hello," Sofia said, trying to place her. The population of McIntosh had grown in recent years to about four thousand, not so many that Sofia didn't frequently run into people she knew but not so few that she was acquainted with everyone. Since she'd won the lottery, however, it seemed that everyone knew her.

This woman was around the same age as she was. Something about her small blue eyes looked vaguely familiar.

"You remember me, don't you?" The woman fussed with her frosted blond hair. Her roots needed a touch-up. "Betty Schreiber from high school. We sat next to each other in Geometry."

The years peeled away, and Sofia recalled that Betty had been a popular majorette who'd dated a star football player and barely noticed Sofia was alive.

"I've been meaning to call you since I moved back to McIntosh," Betty said.

"When did you move back?" Sofia asked, mostly to buy time so she could figure out how to make her escape.

"Maybe five years ago," Betty said. "You know how time flies."

"Yes, I do. Listen, I'm sort of in a hurry."

"Then I should come straight to the point." Betty chewed her bottom lip, shifted her weight from foot to foot. "This is sort of awkward, but considering we were classmates, I was hoping you'd help me out."

Sofia's internal alarm sounded. "Help you out with what?"

"The transmission on my car up and died last week. With my husband out of work— did I tell you I was married?—we don't have the money to fix it. It's been a real hardship."

Sofia remained silent, surprised that she wasn't shocked. But then strangers had asked her for money since she'd won the lottery. Why be amazed that a long-lost classmate was hitting her up?

"It's not like I'm asking you for a new car. It's only a thousand dollars. If you could find it in your heart to do this for me, I'd be so grateful."

Sofia would be grateful if Betty got out of her way. She reached in her pocketbook for her checkbook. She could almost see Betty salivate. "What service station do you use?"

"Excuse me?"

"Tell me the name of the service station, and I'll write out the check."

Betty's face whitened but she recovered nicely. "Surely that's not necessary. Can't you just make out the check to me?"

"I'm sorry, but my stepson would kill me if I did that." Sofia affected a sheepish smile and shrugged. "He's worried that people might try to take advantage of me. I'm sure you understand."

"Well, uh, yes, I do." Betty seemed at a loss as to what to say next. She brought a hand to her head. "Would you believe I don't know the name of the service station my husband uses? I'll have to get back to you on that."

Sofia nodded, careful not to encourage her. She put her checkbook back in her purse. Betty stammered a goodbye and couldn't seem to leave the store fast enough. Sofia hoped it was because she was ashamed of herself but imagined Betty would dream up some other way to ask her for money.

No matter. The woman was gone for now. Sophia walked determinedly to the back of the store, careful to not make it look like she was hurrying. She resisted the urge to take her compact from her purse and check her makeup. Tony said she looked good. She knew she looked good.

“Just do this,” she whispered aloud when she was almost at the counter.

She faltered when she noticed a middle-aged man placing an order. She glanced at him long enough to ascertain she didn’t know him, but the butcher behind the glass counter caught her attention.

In a white butcher’s apron with his large, strong hands encased in flimsy plastic gloves, Art Sandusky wasn’t trying to be noticed. He was a simple man: kind, hardworking, principled.

She’d known him since he’d moved to McIntosh and opened Sandusky’s fifteen years ago. The gossip was that his ex-wife had left him for another man, something Sofia had found to be inconceivable even before she’d realized she was attracted to him.

It had happened gradually. At some point during the last year, she’d begun to remember her late husband with warmth instead of grief. She’d looked around when her teary eyes had cleared and noticed Art looking back.

He wasn’t a fast worker. She’d dropped half a dozen hints before he’d asked her to the movies nearly a month ago. He’d bought her popcorn, held her hand and made her feel like a teenager. His good-night kiss had made her feel like a woman.

And then...nothing. If she didn’t count the casual nod when they happened to run into each other. Yes, she’d been preoccupied after winning the lottery. But not too busy for Art.

He glanced up at her and for an instant she thought she saw appreciation gleam in his hazel eyes. But then he nodded in that impersonal way she found so maddening and finished wrapping steaks for his customer with quiet efficiency.

Most things about Art were understated. Of average height and weight, he spoke softly, smiled gently and wore muted colors. Only when she looked closer had she noticed his hazel eyes were as soft as a doe’s, his brown hair luxuriously thick and his face etched with the kind of character only accomplished by years of good living.

“What can I get for you today, Sofia?” he asked when the other customer had gone, as though they’d never shared a sizzling kiss at her front door.

An explanation, she thought.

Tell him.

Her stomach rolled and pitched, a reaction she vaguely remembered from high school when faced with the cutest boy in school. She swallowed—and chickened out.

“Tony’s home. I thought I’d grill some steaks to welcome him.”

She never grilled steaks. She specialized in pasta dishes and could do wonders with chicken. She hazily remembered that they had a grill but wasn’t sure where it was.

“I have some top sirloin on sale.” He gestured to the cuts of marbled steak underneath the glass counter while she mentally called herself a coward. “Or if you want something fancier, you could go with New York strip. Or maybe the—”

“Why are you avoiding me?” she blurted out.

He blinked, frowned. “Excuse me?”

Her heart raced and her stomach churned. What was it about this man that made her feel so gauche and unsure of herself? She’d been married and widowed. She’d worked in restaurants, where she was used to handling men with ease and humor. With Art, she had trouble forming a sentence.

“At the store last week, you turned down another aisle when you saw me coming. And at the post office the week before that, you couldn’t leave fast enough when I got there.”

His soft eyes slid away, then back. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She swallowed again but the action did nothing to get rid of the lump in her throat. “I had a nice time when we went out. I thought you did, too.”

“I did,” he confirmed in that same maddeningly calm voice.

She ignored the butterflies that fluttered unhappily in her gut. “Then why haven’t you called me?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “I’ve been busy.”

The universal cop-out line of men everywhere. All the breath left her lungs. She’d been so sure an explanation existed for his sudden chill and now one occurred to her. He didn’t want to date her again.

“I’ve been busy, too.” The corners of her mouth felt weighted by lead, but she forced herself to smile.

A customer—somebody else she didn’t recognize; thank goodness—got into line behind her. Art glanced over her shoulder, then met her eyes, but barely.

“How about those steaks?” Art said. “Can I pick you out two nice top sirloins?”

Sofia willed her lips not to tremble. “You know what, I’ve changed my mind. I think I’ll make Tony a nice lasagna instead.”

His eyebrows drew together, and his expression appeared pained. She waited, hoping he’d say something to stop her from leaving.

“I’ll see you around then, Sofia,” he said.

She nodded, turned and walked blindly down a mercifully empty aisle for the exit. If there’d been a bed in sight, she’d have thrown herself down on it and cried.

“Mrs. Donatelli.” A petite woman with salt-and-pepper hair appeared from an adjacent aisle, flagging her down before she reached the exit. Sofia recognized her as a teacher at the local high school. “I’m Mary Winters. I taught English to Tony years ago.”

Not trusting her voice not to wobble, Sofia said nothing.

“I’m heading up a charity drive to fight illiteracy, and I was wondering if you could—”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do this right now,” Sofia said and banged through the door to the street.

Everybody wanted something from her, it seemed, except the one man to whom she’d gladly give her heart.

CHAPTER FIVE

KAYLEE MOVED around the cute little two-bedroom, one-bath house as though in a trance. And maybe she was, because she’d been with Tony for half the morning and had yet to come clean about why she was in McIntosh.

“You can move in tomorrow if you like it. All I’d need is first and last months’ rent plus a security deposit,” the owner offered. He was a kindly, white-haired gentleman named Mr. Stanton who reminded her of her maternal grandfather, who used to slip her five-dollar bills on the sly. She needed a whole lot more than five dollars now.

“What do you think, Kaylee?” Tony prompted.

She thought matters had quickly spiraled out of control. She was inside a house she couldn’t afford with a man who didn’t know she’d come to McIntosh to meet his stepmother.

After confirming the relationship by consulting the phone book Kaylee found in a dresser drawer in her motel room last night, she’d dialed the listed number, intending to invent an excuse for why she couldn’t meet him. An operator’s recorded voice had come over the line, informing her that the number had been changed and was now unlisted.

Resigned to meeting Tony this morning as planned, she’d spent a restless night during which she’d decided to immediately tell him she suspected she could be his stepsister.

Except he’d been waiting for them in the driveway, and the moment of truth had been easy to put off. Worse, she hadn’t been able to resist asking him about his childhood.

He’d soon gotten around to telling her about Sofia, although he hadn’t mentioned the lottery. Tony said Sofia had constantly surprised him when he was growing up. Presenting him with a congratulatory balloon for making the honor roll. Driving him to Cincinnati to see a ball game on his birthday. Baking him a chocolate cake for no good reason.

His friends, he said, used to wish she was their mother. Even with a full-time job, she'd been a tireless volunteer: room mother, religious-education teacher, team mom.

The more he talked, the more she'd ached for her fantasy of having Sofia for a mother to become reality.

"Kaylee?" Tony's voice again. He repeated, "What do you think?"

She could tell what Tony thought. Joey's impression wasn't hard to figure, either. He was swinging from an old tire that hung from the sturdy branch of a grand oak tree around back.

"I need to think about it," she told him, then addressed Mr. Stanton. "Can I get your phone number so I can contact you later?"

"Don't think too long. The classified ad will be in the newspaper tomorrow, and I figure I'll get plenty of interest," he said before shuffling off in search of pen and paper.

Tony regarded her closely. "If you're worried about the upfront cost, we could ask Mr. Stanton if he'd be willing to waive the security deposit."

Kaylee felt her face heat. She'd taken another look at her finances before they'd started their search and the rent she could afford to pay was distressingly low.

The reality was that she'd let her heart rule her head. Again. She'd rushed to McIntosh, which was no more affordable than Fort Lauderdale. Not on a waitress's salary with child-care costs thrown into the mix.

She needed to relocate to a bigger city where better-paying jobs and housing choices were more plentiful. Even then, she'd probably have to advertise for a roommate to share expenses.

"Kaylee, how does that sound?"

She bit her bottom lip while she resigned herself to confiding in him about her financial problems. If she didn't, he'd keep on showing her places she had no prayer of renting.

"That won't help." Kaylee squared her shoulders but couldn't meet his eyes. "I can't afford to live here."

He was silent for a moment. "Doesn't Joe's father pay you child support?"

"He's not in the picture," she said evasively, hoping he'd take the hint and leave the subject of Joey's father alone.

"Then let's ask Mr. Stanton if he'll lower the rent."

Kaylee shook her head. "He wouldn't be able to lower the rent enough."

Tony started to say something else but then Mr. Stanton reentered the room and handed her a piece of scrap paper.

"Here's my number," he said. "I don't have one of those cell phones but the grandkids bought me an answering machine last Christmas so you can leave a message if I'm not in."

Kaylee thanked him and gathered up Joey. Tony was a strong, silent presence at her side. He'd probably never had money problems in his life.

Because Tony knew McIntosh better than she did, he'd insisted on driving that morning. She settled uncomfortably into the passenger's seat, loathe to start a conversation.

What could she say that wouldn't sound like she was asking for a handout? And, oh, Lord, she'd shrivel up and die if he offered her money.

"That house was nice, Mom," Joey piped up from the backseat. "Did you see how high I went on the swing? And I found a beetle in the yard."

"Lots of backyards have beetles, Joe-Joe," Kaylee said.

She wondered why he didn't answer until she heard the beeps that signaled he'd turned on his GameBoy.

She tried to admire the colorful spring blossoms on the passing trees, but her eyes burned with embarrassment. The silence, though, was worse. She started to wish that Tony would say something. Finally, he did.

"How did you manage things in Fort Lauderdale?"

“I shared a duplex with another single mother. She worked days. I waitressed nights. Between us, there was always somebody home to watch the kids. It worked out great until she moved in with her boyfriend.”

“Is that when you decided to come to McIntosh?”

He was fishing, no doubt trying to discover how she’d come to be in McIntosh without a job and so little money. Recognizing the perfect opening for her confession, her breathing grew short and her palms dampened.

“Yeah!” Joey suddenly yelled from the backseat.

Kaylee whirled to find Joey staring down at his GameBoy, a rapt expression on his face. He glanced up at her.

“I just beat level six, Mom. I’ve never done that before.”

She nodded and tried to look appropriately impressed before gathering her courage and turning back around.

She couldn’t put it off any longer. She had to tell Tony why she was in McIntosh.

She’d been so preoccupied that it came as a surprise to see they were already back at Sofia Donatelli’s house. A woman was emerging from a Volvo parked in the driveway.

“There’s Sofia.” Tony’s voice held a smile as he pulled his car behind the Volvo. “I’ll introduce you.”

Kaylee couldn’t speak. She couldn’t move. She could hardly breathe as she stared transfixed at the woman from the television broadcast.

Sofia Donatelli moved toward the car with an easy grace, and everything about her seemed more vivid than it had on television. Her hair was a darker brown, her smile warmer, her eyes softer.

Tony hopped out of the car, then opened the door to the backseat, rousing Joey from his GameBoy-induced stupor. Feeling as though she were moving in quicksand, Kaylee opened the passenger door and got out of the car.

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