

Somebody's Baby (Lurlene McDaniel (Hardcover))

By Lurlene McDaniel

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Love, family, acceptance, and forgiveness are at the center of this heartfelt novel that explores the unpredictable paths that allow people to follow their dreams and help them find a way back home.

Ever since Sloan won a reality television singing competition, her music career has taken off. She suddenly finds herself with a manager, a recording contract, and a tour in the works. Her manager warned her that strangers would ask her for all sorts of things, and that she must not respond. But one email stands out—from a young woman who claims to be Sloan’s half sister. Sloan’s mother, now deceased, never told her who her father was, so the prospect of knowing some family history is too strong a desire to ignore.

Now Sloan must return to Windemere, the town where she grew up, to face a past she’s worked hard to forget. One trip leads to another, and when circumstances take a devastating turn, Sloan is faced with a complicated choice involving not only herself, but also those who have come to depend on her.

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Editorial Review

Review
"There's no denying McDaniel's command of her material. . . .inspriational romance by a genre master."
—*Kirkus Reviews*

About the Author
LURLENE McDANIEL began writing inspirational novels about teenagers facing life-altering situations when her son was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. “I want kids to know that while people don’t get to choose what life gives to them, they do get to choose how they respond,” she has said.

Lurlene McDaniel’s novels are hard-hitting and realistic, but also leave readers with inspiration and hope. Her bestselling books have received acclaim from readers, teachers, parents, and reviewers; they include *The Year of Luminous Love* and its companion, *The Year of Chasing Dreams; Don’t Die, My Love; Till Death Do Us Part; Telling Christina Goodbye; True Love: Three Novels;* and many more.

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one

“This was in today’s batch of emails. I printed it out for you. Do you think it’s legit?”

Sloan scanned the paper, then glanced up at Kiley, Terri Levine’s young assistant, who stood anxiously waiting for her reaction.

“I know Terri warned you about people trying to latch on after your big win,” Kiley began. “I know you’ve said you didn’t have any family in Tennessee, but this sounds so .?.?. so genuine. Even desperate. I have two sisters. They mean the world to me. So I started thinking that maybe you should see the message. I mean .?.?. just in case.” Kiley’s breathless explanation petered out.

Sloan stared down at the letter in her trembling hands. She’d read through it twice and felt shaken to her core. Of course she remembered Terri Levine’s warning! “People will come out of the woodwork, Sloan. You’re a hundred grand richer and a rising music star, so you’re going to be swamped with all kinds of offers and ‘opportunities.’ Everything must come through my firm, and I mean everything. Building your career isn’t a sprint, Sloan. It’s a marathon.”

Sloan reread the letter in the glaring sunlight.

Dear Sloan Gabriel,

We have never met, and maybe this letter will never reach you, but I had to try. My name is Lindsey Sloan Ridley. Sloan is my maiden name, same as your first name. I live in Windemere, Tennessee, and I'm your sister--well, really your half sister. You might think I'm some crazy person, but please believe me. I can prove to you the things I'm writing.

I never knew you existed until about two years ago because our daddy, Jerry Sloan, kept you a secret from me. A secret he was wrong to keep. I'm seven years older than you, and there is a long story attached to both our pasts, too long and too private for me to write in a note you might never read.

But if you do read this, I'm asking--begging--you to contact me. Please .?.?. it's a matter of life and death.

My phone number and address are below.

Lindsey

A sister? She had a sister? Sloan had never known her father, and all her mother, LaDonna, had ever said about him when Sloan was growing up was that he was a dirtbag who'd abandoned them. If the words in the letter were true, LaDonna had given her daughter the dirtbag's name--Sloan. Perverse, Sloan now thought. Spiteful.

Sloan walked to the bank of spotless windows of Terri Levine's Public Relation firm's expansive glass-walled twentieth floor. Far below, Los Angeles traffic inched down the boulevard. "Yes .?.?. I remember what Terri said about complete strangers taking advantage." She'd learned that much from LaDonna. "People will screw you every chance they get, so don't trust nobody. Ever." Not trusting LaDonna had been Sloan's first lesson.

In November over a year before, Sloan had fled her former life in Tennessee, determined to leave her past and its heartrending memories behind and follow her dreams. She'd hitched her way across the country and arrived in Los Angeles friendless and broke, armed with nothing but hope and an old guitar to audition for the American Singer contest open auditions to be held in the summer. In the meantime she'd taken jobs waiting tables and serving drinks, rented a musty room in a run-down apartment building, taken in a roommate who'd made a pigsty seem inviting, and learned to navigate LA's public transportation system, limited as it was. When American Singer had held open auditions she'd stood in long lines of singer wannabes for hours under a hot sun waiting for a chance to go before the judges. She had made the first cut. And the second. And finally landed a spot on the nationally televised program that had aired in January.

Six weeks later, on Valentine's Day, she'd stood onstage between the emcee and one other finalist, her heart crashing inside her chest, her mouth cotton dry, her face aching from smiling. And the crowd in the theater where the show was telecast live across the country had whooped and stomped, and confetti had fallen, and the American Singer anthem had played when she, Sloan Quentin Gabriel, had won it all.

Now, only two weeks after the announcement, her life in LA had done a 180-degree turn, until this email had crashed her party.

"Then it was okay to show you the letter?" Kiley asked. "Sometimes it's hard to decide the best thing to do. I mean, some of the email stories fans send winners can break your heart. Others just want some stardust--that's what Terri calls mail dumps from perfect strangers. It's easy to decide how to handle most of the stuff that comes in. Delete, delete, delete. But sometimes .?.?."

Terri Levine, owner of the PR firm, was now Sloan's agent. Overseeing media accounts, Facebook, and fan-driven emails was part of Kiley's job. Sloan didn't want to run afoul of Terri Levine, but she didn't want to ignore this particular email either. The letter certainly should have gone to Terri first, but softhearted Kiley had delivered it to Sloan, a risk that could mean her job.

Sloan turned from the window, saw Kiley toying nervously with her necklace, and offered an encouraging smile. "It's fine, Kiley. Thanks."

Kiley relaxed. "Do you know where this Windemere is?"

"It's a small town not too far from Nashville." Since coming to LA, Sloan had been telling people she was from Nashville, which was partly true--she had left Windemere for the Music City, where she'd honed her solo style of sultry country pop in small bars and restaurants in the Music Row area. Calling Nashville home on the American Singer show was far more glamorous than confessing she'd grown up in rural Windemere, in a trailer park, with an alcoholic mother who slept around.

Currently Sloan was in the midst of her wardrobe and image makeover, and of laying down tracks for an EP--an extended play CD that was going to radio stations and into stores to quickly cash in on the instant fame of her winning the contest. The record label that held her new contract was banking on the EP to climb the music charts and also whet the public's appetite for her debut album she had yet to record.

But now, with a star-studded future in front of her, Sloan's past had come calling, and with it, possible answers she had craved to know since childhood. Who was her father? Why had he walked away? Of course, anybody living back in Windemere, where she'd grown up and gone to school, could have written the letter to scam her, but Sloan couldn't confess this to Kiley. Her singing voice had been her escape from the hard life and bad memories of that small town.

"Are you all right?" Kiley asked.

Sloan turned, flashed a bright smile. "Just fine. No need to worry about this, so don't put yourself in the line of fire with the boss, Kiley. I'll handle this with Terri."

"You sure?"

"I'll talk to her tonight," Sloan assured the nervous girl.

Sloan watched Kiley flee the room while she folded the letter and slipped it into the back pocket of her brand-new ridiculously overpriced pair of jeans. She would tell Terri about the letter. But not just yet.

"I'll pick you up at ten in the morning," Sloan's driver said as she exited the car. She watched him drive away from the front of her apartment building in the gated complex. This was one of the perks Terri and the record label had given her--a car and driver to and from her scheduled appointments. She liked not having to drive on LA's overly congested freeways, but she disliked the restrictions placed on her by her "handler." Terri had been firm about Sloan sticking to a list of rules that included, "If you want to go someplace, call your driver." A safety measure to keep newly minted and suddenly richer winners in check.

Sloan took an elevator up to her luxury apartment, a spacious corner unit of modern design and designer furniture, none of it belonging to her. She wondered how many other American Singer winners had been squirreled away in the place. No matter. She'd one day own a place bigger and grander.

Sloan grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and looked at her schedule, which was posted so she always knew where to be. Terri was in charge of building Sloan's image, so Sloan's time was well organized. Tomorrow at eleven she worked with the voice coach. Mandatory. Sloan's voice and versatility had won her the contest, but the trainer was helping her with exercises to better control her breathing and song phrasing. Her stage presence was under reconstruction too. She loved performing, but in these big leagues everyone could be made better.

After the voice coach, the recording studio. The song she'd sung to win the contest was already going on the disc, and two others were under consideration. She was eager to get the EP CD into stores and then concentrate on the new album. Her album. And the big money advance that had come with it. She fantasized about hit albums, concert tours, and all the joys that came with fame. Then she sobered. Would this Lindsey Sloan Ridley pull her back to a place she'd thought she'd left behind forever? But if the woman really was her half sister .?.?. if she truly was a link to long-buried family roots--

Sloan growled and flopped onto a large leather chair, slugged down her water. She pulled her cell phone from the pocket of her jeans. Or rather, her agent's cell phone. "Keep this on you at all times," Terri had said when handing it to Sloan. "Never know when I might have to make changes in your schedule. This phone is our communications lifeline." Sloan sighed, realizing it would be a long time before she'd be able to again come and go as she pleased.

She pulled out the folded paper. The phone's time stamp showed one p.m., which meant it was two hours earlier in Windemere. She reread the letter and, with her heart hammering, punched in the digits. To the empty room, and with sarcasm, Sloan said, "Okay, Sister, you want me to reach out and hear your story? It's time to tell me what you got."

two

Sloan listened to the sounds of a ringing phone coming from hundreds of miles away, her mind tripping

backward to growing up in Windemere, her dark childhood and her school years, the boy who'd loved her, and how she'd walked away. Dragging her mind from the edge of the swell of memories, she hissed, "Answer!" into her cell. She was about to hang up, when a breathless voice said in a hushed whisper, "Hello."

Sloan went momentarily speechless, then cleared her throat and asked, "Is this Lindsey?"

"No, I'm her friend Gloria. Can I help you?"

The thick sludge of the woman's Southern accent reminded Sloan again of her roots. In LA most people's voices were homogenous. She was working to shed her accent, but people still heard it, often asked where she'd come from in the South. "Is Lindsey there? I'd like to speak to her. Please."

"She is here, but she's nappin'. I can't wake her just yet."

Gloria said cain't, dragging out the word in a voice that Sloan found irritating. Napping? What grown woman napped in at eleven in the morning? A drunk, she quickly realized. Like Sloan's mother.

"Can I take a message for her?" Gloria asked.

Sloan drew a blank, fumbled for an answer. "You have any idea when she'll be awake?"

"She tries to be up when Toby comes home, if she can." Gloria was talking in riddles, throwing out names. She offered information, but Sloan had no context. "If you want, I'll have her call you when she gets up."

"No. I--I'll call back later .?.?. at a better time. When she's awake."

"That would be nice," Gloria said. "Can I say who's callin'? She likes it when friends call to talk."

"Later. It .?.?. it isn't important." Sloan disconnected, sat brooding, the honey drip of Gloria's voice still inside her head. Who were these people? Did she even want to know them? Her embittered mother had held

back information about her father, a man who'd walked away and never ever acknowledged Sloan's existence. That pain and, yes, anger too had lain inside her heart for all twenty-three years of her life. No birthday cards. No Christmas gifts. Nothing.

Sloan shoved up from the chair, went to her bedroom and the walk-in closet, and sorted through a pile of clothes on the floor until she found her bikini. She would lay out at the pool, work on her tan. In LA, glamour radiated from the depths of glowing bronze skin. In Windemere most people sported "farmers' tans," necks and forearms browned by the sun, torsos as pale as milk.

In their first meeting following Sloan's win, Terri had insisted, "No secrets. I can't shape your future if there's something that blindsides me from your past." Sloan slipped on the bikini, realizing that now she had a dilemma. There were things in her past she didn't want to talk about to anyone. This letter had hit her hard, and she was unsure how to tell Terri, or even if she should say anything until she personally checked out the story. And not over the phone but in a face-to-face meeting with this Lindsey person. If the story was bogus, Sloan could deal with Lindsey without involving Terri at all.

Sloan went down to the pool, mulling over a way to slip out of LA without too many questions being asked.

"You seem distracted. Any problems?"

Sloan glanced up from her dinner plate at Terri sitting across the table. They were in a restaurant, eating a late supper, Sloan with a platter of fries and a burger, Terri with her small green salad. The woman was in her fifties, waspishly thin, dark haired, and stylishly dressed, always looking polished and pulled together, even after a fourteen-hour day. "No .?.?. no problems."

"I wouldn't think so. Three of your songs from the show are topping iTunes downloads. All we need is one more song to round out your EP."

They'd spent most of the evening in a recording studio listening to songs and trying to pin one down that was special enough for the extended-play CD, but so far the producer, Tom Jackson, wasn't satisfied. "Tom's being too picky. What's wrong with just grabbing another song from the show?" Sloan dragged a fry through a glob of ketchup.

“We want something extra special, something original, if possible.” Terri’s phone vibrated. “A text. Excuse me.”

Sloan was anxious to get started on her solo album, and a successful album would launch her even higher than the contest. She jiggled her legs, impatient for Terri to finish texting. She also checked out the restaurant, its low lights, the candles on every table, and the pale pink linens, all giving the room an elegant ambience intended to enhance the dining experience. There weren’t many diners this late in the evening, but the ones Sloan saw were couples, a reminder that she hadn’t had a date in much too long. She shelved such thoughts, reminded herself that relationships were complicated, and breakups painful. She wanted to focus on one thing only--a singing career.

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