



Honeysuckle Summer (The Sweet Magnolias)

By Sherryl Woods

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Carter understands why Raylene is trapped inside. He's even taken to bringing the outside world to *her*. But with two kid sisters to raise, just how much time can he devote to this woman who's stolen his heart?

Raylene knows Carter is a man worth loving, but she may never be strong enough to accept what he's offering. How long can she ask him to wait? Maybe they'll never have more than this one sweet summer.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

The story continues in Woods' Southern enclave, Serenity, following *Home in Carolina* (2010). Raylene's husband abused her dreadfully, and since leaving Charleston for Serenity more than a year ago she's been unable to set foot outside Sarah's house. When sheriff's deputy Carter brings young Tommy home after his disappearance, he and Raylene are immediately attracted to each other. Carter is doing his best to parent his much-younger sisters, but he is concerned because Carrie doesn't seem to be adjusting well to life in Serenity, and Raylene fears she may be anorexic. Meanwhile, Sarah's ex-husband, Walter, is settling nicely into his job as ad executive at the radio station, and Raylene impulsively matchmakes between him and Mary's daughter Rory Sue. Woods handily wraps up her second-generation Sweet Magnolia contemporary romance miniseries with her usual flair for small-town drama, close friendships, family alliances, and compassionate approach to social and emotional issues. --Lynne Welch

About the Author

With her roots firmly planted in the South, Sherryl Woods has written many of her more than 100 books in that distinctive setting, whether in her home state of Virginia, her adopted state, Florida, or her much-adored South Carolina. Sherryl is best known for her ability to creating endearing small town communities and families. She is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of over 75 romances for Silhouette Desire and Special Edition.

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Raylene stood in the kitchen doorway on a day that was surprisingly cool for the first of June. She stared in dismay at the backyard where Sarah's children, Tommy and Libby, had been playing not two minutes before. Now only two-year-old Libby was in sight. She was standing next to the open gate of the fenced-in yard.

Tommy's absence immediately set off panic in Raylene. "Libby," she called. "Sweetie, come here. Where's Tommy?"

Toddling to Raylene, her big eyes filled with tears, Libby pointed in the direction of the street.

"Come inside," Raylene commanded. She could only deal with one missing child at a time. Raylene scooped up Libby, then raced toward the front door and flung it open to peer up and down the block. Tommy was nowhere in sight. Barely five, he couldn't have gone too far in the time she'd been in the kitchen, she assured herself. She'd turned away just long enough to put a few cookies on a plate and pour three glasses of lemonade. Two minutes, maybe three.

Normally she would have brought the kids inside when the sitter left to run an errand, but it had been such a beautiful day, she'd decided to let them continue playing in the yard. What had she been thinking? She'd been terrified ever since she'd moved in with Sarah and her family that something like this would happen on her watch. She'd taken every precaution she could think of to avoid it. Now, just one slip and all her worst fears were coming true.

Opening the door, she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Tommy!" She managed to inch over the threshold, but just barely. The panic she'd felt upon discovering Tommy was gone multiplied a thousandfold as she tried to force herself to take the next step and then the next. It took every bit of willpower she possessed not to scramble right back inside. She clutched Libby so tightly that the little girl whimpered in protest.

"Sorry, baby," Raylene soothed.

Again, she shouted for Tommy, but there was no response. Frustration warred with terror.

Tommy knew the rules. He knew, even if he didn't understand, that she couldn't leave the house to go chasing after him. He was also an adventurous preschooler for whom rules meant very little. He couldn't possibly comprehend that the thought of leaving the safe haven of their home terrified her. Sometimes it was beyond her understanding, too.

Ever since Raylene had run from her abusive husband, she'd grown increasingly housebound, scared of everything beyond the boundaries of these walls. It didn't seem to matter that Paul Hammond was safely locked behind bars, at least for a few more months. She couldn't make herself leave the house. If anything, she'd been getting worse, not better.

She forced herself to inch down the last step and onto the sidewalk, fought the fear clawing its way up the back of her throat, the trembling in her limbs. Unable to take one more step, she shouted again and again.

"Tommy Price! You get back in this yard right this minute!"

She scanned the street in every direction, fully expecting him to pop out from behind a bush, a lopsided grin on his face at having won some misguided game of hide-and-seek.

Instead, there was no sign of movement on the quiet, tree-lined street. Any teens were inside playing video games or doing homework. The younger children on the block were probably indoors having an after-school snack. An hour from now, more than likely there would be a dozen kids who could tell her in which direction Tommy had gone, but for now there was no one in sight.

Raylene tried to calm herself with the reminder that Serenity was a safe town, and small enough that almost anyone would recognize Tommy and bring him straight home. Unfortunately, those thoughts warred with too many dangerous possibilities.

She tried telling herself that if a stranger had approached, one or both of the kids would have screamed. They'd been drilled often enough to be alert to that kind of danger. Even Libby was old enough to be wary of anyone she didn't know. That Raylene hadn't heard any fearful shouts was some consolation.

All of this went spinning through her head in what seemed like an eternity, but was probably no more than a couple of minutes. She had a choice to make. She could fight her fears and try to go farther than the front steps, or she could call for help. Given her inability to leave the house for so long, she opted for being smart over saving her pride. Not wanting to waste another precious second, she punched in 911 on the portable phone.

Her second call was to the Serenity radio station where Sarah had a morning show of talk and music. She often stayed after the show ended to book future guests. It was the station owner and Sarah's soon-to-be husband, Travis McDonald, who took the call.

"I'm so sorry," Raylene kept telling him, trying not to break down in tears as she rambled through the story. "I swear I only looked away for a few minutes, and I tried to go searching for him, Travis. I really tried. I'm standing on the sidewalk now, and you know how long it's been since I've come even this far. I've called the sheriff's office. They're sending a deputy right away."

"It's okay, Raylene. Everything's going to be fine," he reassured her, though she could hear the underlying tension in his normally laid-back tone. "I'll tell Sarah what's going on and we'll be there in five minutes. No need to panic. Tommy's probably playing next door. Give Lynn a call."

"But surely she would have heard me shouting for him," Raylene protested. "Hurry, Travis, please. I'll try to go looking myself, but I don't know if I can."

Travis, bless him, didn't criticize her for this phobia that had taken over her life. He just reassured her that he was on his way. "Call next door," he repeated. "The number's on the bulletin board by the phone in the kitchen. Lynn will help until we get there."

"Of course," she said, furious with herself for not thinking of that sooner.

But when she reached Lynn, the neighbor reminded Raylene that her daughter was in a playgroup this afternoon.

"I haven't seen Tommy, but I'll be right over to help with the search," Lynn said at once.

"Don't bother coming here," Raylene told her. "If you could just look up and down the street toward town and maybe alert some more of the neighbors, I'll send Travis in the other direction as soon as he gets here. Surely Tommy can't be more than a few blocks away."

"Will do," Lynn promised, then hesitated. "Are you okay? Anything you need before I start hunting?"

"No, I'm fine." In fact, finding herself with an actual role—acting as command central for news from those actually out searching—finally began to steady her nerves. This was something she could do. She could keep Libby close and safe, make calls, coordinate efforts, even wait for Tommy to wander back from whatever adventure he'd gone on. Shaking with relief that others were now doing what she couldn't, she sat down on the top step to watch and wait.

Sitting there on the front stoop, phone and lemonade in hand, Libby in her arms, Raylene peered up and down the street for some sign of Tommy, or at least of Travis or the deputy that the sheriff's department had promised to send.

When the wait began to seem endless, she once again tried to venture back down the sidewalk. Even though she took a deep breath and told herself she'd already done this once today, her palms began to sweat. Her heartbeat accelerated, and her breath seemed to lodge in her throat. Tears of frustration filled her eyes. She ought to be able to take this one short step, dammit! There was a crisis, and she was absolutely useless.

For the first time since she'd given in to her fears and settled for such a limited existence, she realized just how much might be at stake. Though the kids were the sitter's responsibility at this time of day, Sarah had depended on Raylene to be her backup, to keep her children safe if she ever happened to be left in charge, even for a brief time. She'd let Sarah down, let Tommy down.

Consumed with self-derision, Raylene realized they all should have known better. Any length of time with her was too long, especially for Tommy, who had his daddy's stubbornness and tenacity along with the conviction that he was now a big boy. He was growing more independent by the day.

Raylene should have put her foot down and refused to look after the kids at all, not for an hour, not even for five minutes. She knew Sarah was determined to convince her that she was still normal, instead of some basket case, but Raylene should have insisted that the risks were too great. If anything happened to that little boy, she'd never be able to forgive herself.

When Travis's car squealed into the driveway and Sarah jumped out practically before he hit the brakes, Raylene nearly collapsed with relief.

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry," she said as Sarah hugged her fiercely and told her not to worry. It was ironic really to have Tommy's mom consoling *her*, when it should have been the other way around.

Libby took one look at Travis and held out her arms. There was no question that she adored her prospective stepdaddy. Travis took Libby from Raylene's arms and held her close.

"It's going to be fine," Sarah said, though her confident words were belied by the fear shadowing her eyes. "Tommy can't possibly have gone far. What happened, anyway? Travis tried to tell me, but all I could hear was blah-blah-blah through the haze of terror that rushed through me."

Raylene repeated the story she'd told Travis on the phone. "The sitter went to pick up a few things we needed for supper." She glanced at her watch and saw that even after all the commotion, less than a half hour had passed. "She should be back here any second. I swear, Tommy and Libby weren't out of my sight more than a couple of minutes. When I looked back, the gate was open and Tommy was gone. I couldn't believe my eyes."

"Well, I can believe it," Sarah said. "He's as slippery as a little eel. He's constantly escaping, you know that, even when Travis and I think we're watching him like hawks. He's figured out where his friends live and likes to go visit. He doesn't grasp the concept of getting permission. That's probably what happened today."

"Lynn's out knocking on doors," Raylene said. "If that's what happened, she should have news soon." She met Sarah's gaze, reluctant to stir the distrust that still existed between Sarah and her ex-husband. "I hate to bring this up, but you don't suppose Walter stopped by and picked him up without coming inside to let me know?"

Sarah shook her head. "I've already called him, just to let him know what's happening, and, to be honest, to make sure he's making a sales call at the business where he said he'd be this afternoon. I phoned him at the business, rather than on his cell, just to be sure."

"Thank God for that, at least," Raylene said, just as the sheriff's car rolled to a stop out front.

Expecting to see the familiar face of one of the longtime deputies or the paunchy form of the sheriff himself, she was stunned to see a tall, lean specimen of pure masculinity emerge from behind the wheel. He had chiseled cheekbones, thick brown hair and, when he removed his aviator sunglasses, a penetrating gaze that could spin a thousand feminine fantasies.

Furious with herself for ogling the man like a lovesick idiot despite being in the middle of a crisis, Raylene

took a gulp of ice-cold lemonade to soothe her suddenly parched throat.

Anticipating a cross-examination, she steadied herself to wait, but instead, he reached out and opened the passenger door to the police cruiser. Tommy emerged, wearing an excited little-boy's grin over the adventure he'd apparently had.

"I got to ride in a police car," Tommy announced unnecessarily. "And I got to turn on the siren."

Sarah knelt down and pulled Tommy into her arms. Her tears were openly flowing now. Then she held him at arm's length and her expression turned stern. "Young man, do you have any idea how much trouble you're in? What were you thinking, leaving this yard without permission? You know you're not allowed to go anywhere that Raylene can't see you."

Tommy's chin wobbled precariously. He cast a guilty look in Raylene's direction. "I heard the ice-cream truck, and I had my money in my pocket 'cause we knew Freddie'd be coming soon. I thought I could find him."

Raylene nearly groaned. Of course he'd go chasing after ice cream, though Freddie Wilson usually didn't make his rounds until late afternoon, and normally he stopped right in front of their house so Raylene or the sitter could watch as Tommy made his purchase.

"I looked and looked, but I couldn't find Freddie," Tommy said sorrowfully. "And then I got lost. The policeman found me. He knew my name." He regarded his mom worriedly. "That's okay, right? Policemen are our friends, not strangers."

Sarah nodded. "That's exactly right."

"I found him over on Oak Street," the deputy said, still eyeing Raylene with disapproval. "He took himself quite a walk."

"It's hot and I'm thirsty," Tommy said. "Can Libby and me have lemonade and cookies now?"

"Lemonade, but no cookies," Sarah told him firmly. "Then you're going to your room so Travis and I can have a talk with you about leaving here without an adult. I suspect your daddy will have a few things to say to you, too, when he gets here."

Sarah turned to the deputy. "Thank you so much for finding him and bringing him home."

"No problem," he said, then focused on Raylene. "Ma'am, if you're in charge, you're going to need to keep a closer eye on the children. If something like this happens again, there could be serious consequences."

Raylene flinched at his judgmental tone, though she could hardly argue with the message. "Believe me, it won't happen again," she assured him.

Because as soon as she got back inside, she intended to go through the classified ads and find another place to live. She'd imposed on Sarah long enough. She'd always intended to offer to buy this house from Sarah when she and Travis were married and living at his place, but staying here until then was now out of the question. Surely Sarah would see that after what had happened this afternoon, and if she didn't, then Raylene would enlist Travis, their friend Annie or anyone else she could think of to make sure that Sarah saw reason.

After all, where her kids were concerned, Sarah couldn't justify taking chances, not even to protect her best friend.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Christina Epp:

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