

Praise for Denise Hunter

“Nobody does summer romance better than Denise Hunter, and book one in her new Bluebell Inn Romance Series—*Lake Season*—is proof positive. A curious heroine, a reluctant hero, and an age-old love letter sets love afloat and hearts aflutter in this poignant story that provides the perfect ‘season’ for love.”

—Julie Lessman, award-winning author of the *Daughters of Boston*, *Winds of Change*, and *Isle of Hope* series

“In *Lake Season*, Denise Hunter has created a story with characters so real, I feel like I know them and a setting so rich, I want to visit and stay in the Bluebell Inn. It’s a book I couldn’t put down. This novel is perfect for romance lovers and book clubs.”

—Cara Putman, bestselling and award-winning author

“Denise Hunter writes with a deep understanding of complex family dynamics in *Summer by the Tides*. A perfect blend of romance and women’s fiction.”

—Sherryl Woods, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“Denise Hunter once again proves she’s the queen of romantic drama. *Summer by the Tides* is both a perfect beach romance and a dramatic story of second chances. This novel is Hunter at the top of her game. If you like Robyn Carr, you’ll love Denise Hunter. I couldn’t put it down!”

—Colleen Coble, *USA Today* bestselling author of the *Lavender Tides* series

“I have never read a romance by Denise Hunter that didn’t sweep me away into a happily ever after. Treat yourself!”

—Robin Lee Hatcher, bestselling author of *Who I Am with You for On Magnolia Lane*

“Swoony, fun, and meaningful, [*Honeysuckle Dreams*] should come with a ‘grab your fan’ warning! Hunter’s skill at writing sizzling romance combines with two reader-favorite tropes to deliver a story that is both toe curling and heartwarming.”

—*RT Book Reviews*, 4 stars

“Denise Hunter’s newest novel, *Sweetbriar Cottage*, is a story to fall in love with. True-to-life characters, high stakes, and powerful chemistry blend to tell an emotional story of reconciliation.”

—Brenda Novak, *New York Times* bestselling author

“*Sweetbriar Cottage* is a wonderful story, full of emotional tension and evocative prose. You’ll feel involved in these characters’ lives and carried along by their story as tension ratchets up to a climactic and satisfying conclusion. Terrific read. I thoroughly enjoyed it.”

—Francine Rivers, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Hunter has a wonderful way of sweeping readers into a delightful romance without leaving behind the complications of true love and true life. *Sweetbriar Cottage* is Hunter at the top of her game—a rich, emotional romance that will leave readers yearning for more.”

—Katherine Reay, award-winning author of *The Austen Escape*

“With her usual deft touch, snappy dialogue, and knack for romantic tension, inspirational romance veteran Hunter will continue to delight romance fans with this first Summer Harbor release.”

—*Publishers Weekly* for *Falling Like Snowflakes*

“Hunter is a master romance storyteller. *Falling Like Snowflakes* is charming and fun with a twist of mystery and intrigue. A story that’s sure to endure as a classic reader favorite.”

—Rachel Hauck, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *The Wedding Dress* and *The Love Letter*

“A tender story of faith cast adrift and lives brought together by currents that can only be God-sent. *Barefoot Summer* is a satisfying tale of hope, healing, and a love that’s meant to be. Sail away with Denise Hunter’s well-drawn characters on a journey that is at once romantic and compelling.”

—Lisa Wingate, national bestselling author of *Before We Were Yours*

Lake Season

Also by Denise Hunter

Summer by the Tides

BLUE RIDGE NOVELS

Blue Ridge Sunrise

Honeysuckle Dreams

On Magnolia Lane

SUMMER HARBOR NOVELS

Falling Like Snowflakes

The Goodbye Bride

Just a Kiss

THE CHAPEL SPRINGS

ROMANCE SERIES

Barefoot Summer

A December Bride (novella)

Dancing with Fireflies

The Wishing Season

Married 'til Monday

THE BIG SKY ROMANCE SERIES

A Cowboy's Touch

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The Trouble with Cowboys

NANTUCKET LOVE STORIES

Surrender Bay

The Convenient Groom

Seaside Letters

Driftwood Lane

Sweetbriar Cottage

Sweetwater Gap

Novellas included in
Smitten, *Secretly Smitten*,
and *Smitten Book Club*

Lake Season

DENISE
HUNTER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Lake Season

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Dear friend,

I'm so excited to start a new series with you! This one is centered around a historic inn and three adult siblings who have already found a special place in my heart.

The seed for this first story began when my husband and I were renovating a one-hundred-year-old lake cottage. When the drywall was peeled away we were delighted to uncover signatures on the wooden walls beneath it—the boards had served as a guest book of sorts. The signatures dated back into the 1920s and '30s and, to our surprise, included some notorious gangsters of the day—John Dillinger and Baby Face Nelson among them. That gang was known to have roamed the area and was rumored to have hidden out around the lakes where the cottage was located.

Unfortunately, after consulting with some experts, we found out those signatures were not authentic. But the potential discovery was so exciting that it got my creative juices flowing. What could my protagonist find behind the walls of her historic inn? *Lake Season* is the direct result of that inspiration. I had so much fun conceiving and writing this story, and I'm thrilled to share it with you. I hope you enjoy the journey as much as I did.

Blessings!

Denise

Prologue

The house was eerily silent. Molly Bennett leaned against the closed door, too weary to move another step. Her throat ached from swallowing tears, and a headache throbbed at her temples.

Her older brother, Levi, was still on the sidewalk saying good-bye to the last of the friends and neighbors who had come to offer condolences. The last few days had been exhausting beyond anything she'd ever experienced, but Levi had been like a rock.

A sound on the steps drew her attention, and she looked up the grand staircase to the landing, where the stairs turned for the second floor.

Her eighteen-year-old sister, Grace, peeked around the balustrade. "Are they gone yet?"

"Every last one." Molly straightened, feigning more energy than she felt. Grace had disappeared from the gathering about an hour into it. Who could blame her?

"Come on down," Molly said. "I'll make you a cup of tea."

While Grace settled in the living room Molly went to the kitchen, the old, scarred floor creaking under her feet. Miss Della had already set the kitchen to rights and hugged them good-bye. Molly didn't know what they would've done the last few days without their mother's best friend. She'd guided them through the funeral process, organized today's luncheon, and when it all got to be too much, simply enveloped them in warm hugs.

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The whole town had come together to get the Bennett siblings through the last few days. Mama's beautician of many years did her hair and makeup. Nonnie Hartwell sang Daddy's favorite hymn. Food flooded in from the ladies at church along with offers of help.

When Molly returned, Levi was in the living room with Grace. His dark hair stuck up as if he'd just run his fingers through it. He'd ditched his suit coat in the July heat, and now his tie was loosened, the top shirt button undone. He suddenly looked much older than his twenty-six years.

Grace was faring no better. Her blue eyes were bloodshot, her color wan, and even though it had only been a few days since that awful phone call, she seemed to have lost weight. Her cheeks had hollowed out, and the navy dress Mama bought her for homecoming last fall seemed loose on her lanky frame.

Molly handed Grace the tea, then turned to Levi. "You want something? Coffee, iced tea? Valium?"

"No thanks." Not even a smile.

Molly sat on the sofa next to Grace and kicked off her heels. She hadn't realized until this very moment how much her toes hurt after being squeezed into them for five long hours. She wondered, not for the first time, why society continued these rituals that only exhausted the recently bereaved. Even she, extroverted and chatty, was out of words and the energy to use them.

Levi, letting his guard down for the first time since the accident, slunk back in the recliner across from them. His shoulders gave in to gravity, his eyes closing on a deep sigh.

None of them had taken their parents' seats, Molly noted. Daddy's brown recliner and Mama's corner of the couch sat empty. She could close her eyes right now and almost catch a whiff of Mama's sweet perfume and the leathery scent that followed Daddy as closely as a shadow.

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“What happens next?” Grace asked, tears in her voice. “What are we going to do?”

It was the question that had been rolling around Molly’s mind when she wasn’t finding dress clothes in which to bury their parents or scouring picture albums with her best friend, Skye.

“We don’t have to do anything for a few weeks,” Levi said. “My boss is giving me some time off.”

“And I can finish my summer courses online,” Molly said. “My advisor already approved it.”

At twenty-three Molly was only one semester away from her hospitality degree. Her fall semester would consist of an internship, which she’d already secured at a prominent boutique hotel in Italy.

“But what about after that?” Grace asked.

A look of reluctance came over Levi’s face as his eyes toggled between them, finally settling on his younger sister. “I thought you might come to Los Angeles and stay with me for a while.”

“What do you mean, ‘a while’?” Grace said. “Like till the end of the summer?”

Levi took his time in answering. “Until you finish high school. We’ll have to sell the house and—”

“No!” Grace popped to her feet. Her chest heaved, and her face flushed with emotion. “All my friends are here! And I can’t give up my volleyball team! You can’t take that away from me.”

Grace had been held back in elementary school, so she was only starting her junior year even though she’d just turned eighteen.

“I know it’s not ideal,” Levi said, “but we have to be reasonable, Grace.”

Molly reached for Grace’s hand, but her sister jerked it away.

“I’m staying in Bluebell. I don’t care what you say, I’m staying. We can’t just sell the house. How can you even say that?”

“Honey, we can’t afford to keep it,” Molly said. “There’s still a

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mortgage to pay. Mama and Daddy borrowed from the equity for all the renovations. They still owed a lot of money on it.”

Grace’s eyes turned glassy. “This is my home. Mama and Daddy’s home. They wouldn’t want us to sell it, and you know it.”

Molly couldn’t dispute that.

Their parents had been slowly restoring the historic building to its original purpose: an inn. They’d planned to run it together when their dad retired from his medical practice next year. It had been the town’s first inn, built in 1905, and featured ten bedrooms. Early on it had been a stagecoach stop, then for years it housed the post office, till it was sold and turned into the governor’s summer home. Their parents purchased it when the kids were little, and they’d grown up here.

But four days ago everything had changed.

“We don’t want to sell the house,” Levi said, “but we don’t have another option.”

“Who’s going to buy it like this anyway?” Grace asked, gesturing wildly. “The whole upstairs is in shambles.”

Not an exaggeration. Their parents had been in the process of taking down walls to give the rooms en suite bathrooms.

“It’s not ideal, but it can’t be helped,” Levi said.

“Stop saying that. You could quit your job and move back here. At least until I finish school.”

“Where would I earn enough to support this household? Bluebell’s small, and you know how seasonal it is.”

“You could work in Asheville, couldn’t you? There’s lots of jobs there.”

“That’s too far away, Grace.”

“I’m not leaving my friends!” Grace’s tears spilled over. “We can’t sell the house. All our memories are here. It’d be like losing Mama and Daddy all over again!”

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“Our memories are in our hearts, Gracie,” Molly said. “We won’t ever lose them.”

“That’s just the baloney people say to try and make you feel better! Every time I sit on the porch swing I feel Daddy with me. And every time I walk in the kitchen I see Mama at the sink. I don’t want to forget them.” Her words wobbled.

Molly’s heart ached in her chest. “You won’t forget them. None of us will.”

Grace crossed her arms. “I’m not leaving. I’m eighteen and that makes me a legal adult. I’ll stay with Sarah’s family if I have to.”

Sarah’s family loved Grace, but Mrs. Benson was being treated for breast cancer, and Molly doubted the family could take Grace in for two years. Besides which, Grace needed family right now. They all did. They had one grandmother left, but she was in assisted living in Georgia.

Molly looked at the stubborn tilt to Grace’s chin, the spark of will in her eyes. Then she met Levi’s gaze and held it for a long moment.

The idea that had been forming in the back of her mind the last few days surfaced once again. Crazy. Sheer madness.

But was it really? Was selling the house and moving Grace to a strange city a better option?

“What if . . .” Molly said. “What if we opened the inn just as Mama and Daddy planned?” The idea sounded as crazy on her lips as it had in her mind.

Levi stilled.

“Yes!” Grace said. “We should do it.”

Molly looked at Levi. “You could move back home and get a job here. We have the rest of the equity loan in the bank—maybe enough for the remodel and to float us until it’s complete. We could remodel over the fall and winter just as they were planning to do and open in the spring in time for lake season.”

“You have no idea what you’re asking,” Levi said. “Remodeling this thing would be a full-time job, Molly. And two of us, running an inn this size?”

“*Three* of us.” Grace dropped to the edge of the sofa. “I can work evenings during the school year and all summer, and after I graduate I can work full time.”

“You’re going to college,” Levi said firmly.

Even Molly prickled at his bossy tone. “You have a business degree, Levi, and I’m almost finished with my hospitality degree. We couldn’t be more suited to this.”

“I can do the website,” Grace offered. “And all the artsy stuff. We can make this work. I’ll do whatever you tell me to do, and I won’t complain.”

“I don’t want to be an innkeeper the rest of my life,” Levi said. “And you were aiming for something a little grander than a small inn on Bluebell Lake.”

“It wouldn’t have to be forever.” Molly did want more than this eventually. But all that could wait, couldn’t it? Wasn’t it more important to do what was best for Grace right now?

She shifted to business mode—her brother’s love language. “Look, if we sell the place now, we’ll get pennies on the dollar. Who’s going to want a building that’s half house and half inn? If we finish the remodel and make a go of the place, even for two or three years, it’ll be much more attractive to potential buyers. You know I’m right.”

Levi leaned forward on the chair, resting his elbows on his knees. He gave Molly a pointed look. “What about your internship? You’ve been talking about it for months. *Italy*, Molly. Your dream. You can’t just throw that away.”

Her heart shrank two sizes at the thought of giving up the opportunity. She’d worked so hard to secure that internship, and they’d chosen her over dozens of applicants.

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But one look at Grace's pleading expression solidified her decision and eased her discomfort. Grace needed her now. Needed them both. Their parents would expect them to look out for each other, not their own interests.

"Not going to lie . . ." Molly said. "It'll be hard to turn that down. But everything's changed, Levi. Everything has to be on the table. We can't just go back to life as usual. All we have now is each other."

Her words hung in the air, suspended like a spring fog over the valley. Their parents had taught by example that family came first. Molly hadn't always gotten that right.

They needed to do this. Not only for Grace, but because of what this inn had meant to their parents. It had been their dream; how could their children just let it die?

"Please, Levi?" Grace said quietly. "You know it'll work."

"What I know is that half of businesses fail in the first five years," Levi said, but his tone had softened.

"Mama and Daddy already crunched all the numbers," Molly said. Levi had even helped them with it. "They have a solid business plan, and we have the abilities to carry it out. It's not such a crazy idea. I think we can do this."

She held Levi's eyes for a long moment. It was a lot to ask. He had recently been promoted to project manager at a commercial construction company. He'd be throwing away all that hard work.

But they all would be giving up things they wanted. Even Grace would be investing her time and talents toward this endeavor. Did she know what she was in for? Molly wanted to make sure.

She gave her sister a firm look. "You wouldn't have time for all your extracurricular activities. You'll have to drop everything but volleyball if you're going to help out around here."

"I will. I'll do it. I promise." Grace didn't even blink. "Anything, as long as we get to keep the house."

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“We’ll be selling it eventually anyway,” Molly said. “Once it’s a viable business.”

Molly had dreamed of running a hotel in Tuscany ever since she’d watched a travel show on the region during high school. She’d taken three years of Italian in preparation and had studied everything she could find on Italy and Italian culture.

“I know. I understand. And I know it’s asking a lot of both of you, and I really appreciate that you’d sacrifice so much for me.” Grace’s wide blue eyes pleaded with them.

“I think we can do this,” Molly said again. Ignoring the brief sting of regret, she stuck out her hand, palm down, as they used to do as children. “I’m on board.”

Grace immediately set her hand on Molly’s. “Me too.”

They looked at their brother.

“Levi . . . ?” Molly prodded.

His gaze shifted between his sisters. His mouth pinched at the corners.

Tension gathered, making the air feel tight and heavy somehow.

Finally he heaved a great sigh and stretched out his hand. “I must be crazy. But . . . all right. Let’s do it.”

o n e

Ten months later

Adam Bradford was nobody's idea of a hero. His eyes swept past his reflection in the rearview mirror of his rental car as he pulled up to the curb at the edge of downtown Bluebell.

He did have that crooked nose that seemed so popular on the heroes of romance novels, but he hadn't gotten it in a fistfight. He'd gotten it at the library while unshelving a difficult-to-reach hard-cover copy of *Moby Dick*. And while he might be trim and fit, he did not sport rippling abs, a chiseled jaw, or even the requisite cleft chin. It wasn't just his ordinary looks either. He wasn't particularly adept with people, especially the fairer sex. The irony was not lost on him.

But there were certain things at which he was extremely proficient. Writing—that went without saying—academics, research, planning. Adam was a planner and a plotter, but this time his preparations had completely backfired.

He looked at the majestic white house, likely turn-of-the-century, situated on a shady lawn about twenty feet off the busy sidewalk. There was no sign indicating it was an inn, but his app listed it as such, and he was getting desperate.

He exited the sedan, maneuvered around a small Dumpster, and

followed a walkway past a dirty Bobcat and up to the massive porch. The front door, an old wooden behemoth, was open, a positive sign. He stepped over the threshold to the sudden sound of a circular saw.

There was a grand staircase directly ahead and, to the left of it, a tall mahogany stand that appeared to be a check-in desk. It was unmanned, however, and devoid of a bell. He opened his mouth to call out, but before he could utter a word a head peeked around the corner to the right of the staircase.

“Oh good, you’re here. Help!” Dark hair swung over the slim shoulder of a woman he guessed to be in her early twenties.

She had the kind of natural beauty he associated with soap commercials, and he could easily picture her a few years ago, walking across a football field on homecoming night on the quarterback’s arm.

He pushed his glasses up. “Excuse me?”

“Can you just come here and hold this? This stupid, dumb . . .” She muttered the rest too quietly to be deciphered.

The wooden floor squawked under his brown leather Clarks. He found her sitting on the floor of a massive living room amongst wooden boards of various shapes and sizes; a random pile of nuts, bolts, and screws; and an oversize white instruction sheet, unfolded and tossed to the side. A large box featuring the photo of a gleaming wooden stand sat off to the side.

“If you could just hold this end while I finish this . . . I think I’m finally headed in the right direction.”

He knelt, doing as she asked.

“Thank God you’re here. Grace bet me I couldn’t figure it out, and she’s due home from school in an hour. How was I to know the directions wouldn’t be in English? And the pictures! Do you see those?” She jerked her chin toward the instructions. “It’s like a kindergarten class project gone awry.”

She tossed her hair over her shoulder, and the clean apple-y smell

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of it drifted his way. He looked at the picture on the box and tried to make sense of the few pieces she'd fastened together so far.

"I'm Molly, by the way, Levi's sister, but I guess you already know that."

He tried to process the simple sentence but was distracted by that scent. And the smudge of something white—chalk?—on her nose.

She blinked at him, obviously waiting for a response.

Heat flushed his neck. "Adam Bradford. Um, what language?"

"What?" She spared him a glance, her eyes returning to focus on the screw she was forcing into a too-small hole.

"The directions—what language?"

"Oh, they're in French. This is North Carolina, people. I mean, Spanish maybe. But French? I don't know a single soul who speaks it."

With his free hand he reached for the instructions. As he began reading them to himself, it didn't take long to see they would have to start over.

"See what I mean?" she said. "Impossible."

When she finished with the screw, he let loose of the board and scratched his chin. "I, ah, have good news and bad news."

She looked up at him, and he immediately got caught in her wide amber eyes.

"Let's have the good news first. I'm an optimist when I'm not under pressure to prove myself. And okay, there's a bet on the line. But it's only an ice cream cone. And my dignity. Mainly, my dignity."

He noted flecks of color in her irises, ranging from milk chocolate tones to gold. All that intriguing complexity was framed by luscious dark lashes. Utterly mesmerizing.

"Um . . . the good news?"

He cleared his throat, a hot wave of embarrassment sweeping into his face. "I—I can speak it. That is, I'm fluent. In French, I mean." Just not his mother tongue, apparently.

D E N I S E H U N T E R

“Are you kidding me? That’s awesome. What does it say?”

He gave her a look of warning. “That’s the bad news. I’m afraid we’ll have to start over.”

Her face fell, turning her mouth down in an adorable pout. “Oh, doggonit. It took me forty-five minutes to get this far.”

Could she be any cuter? Adam dragged his gaze from her lips. “It’ll go fast, now that we have directions.”

“Good point.”

They made quick work of separating the pieces she’d assembled, being careful not to strip the screw holes. Then he set to work on the instructions.

“Read it out loud, in French,” she said brightly.

Okay . . . maybe she was the curious sort, an eager learner. He could respect that.

He did as she asked, translating internally as he went, and directed her through the beginning stages of the project. While the sketches were, indeed, a jumble of splotchy lines, the written instructions were clear and concise.

As they made quick work of the assembly, Adam was barely cognizant of the background noises: intermittent hammering, voices coming from upstairs, and the saw he’d heard earlier, periodically making him raise his voice to be heard.

Molly held pieces in place while he worked in the screws and tightened bolts. She had small hands with long fingers that tapered down to neat, unpainted fingernails. She wore only a utilitarian silver watch that complemented her creamy skin.

She’d make a nice protagonist, he found himself thinking. Though she was delicate in size, he sensed the kind of inner strength imperative in a heroine. Creativity surged inside. It was the first time since he’d turned in *Under the Starry Sky* that he’d felt anything like

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the stirrings of inspiration. He wished for a pad and paper, because Adam Bradford had just found his muse.



Molly watched as Adam deftly put the last piece in place. The stand was becoming heavy and unwieldy, but she could see it would serve its purpose nicely. She needed the piece to stand just inside the entry, large enough to hold a welcoming bouquet of fresh flowers and a guest book. The Queen Anne style fit in with the home's décor without breaking their budget.

Adam flipped the stand upright, his biceps bunching beneath his button-up. He said something in French.

She looked at the stand. It appeared to be complete, and there were no parts left unused. "Is there more? We're all out of parts."

He ducked his head. "No. I said, 'That should do it.'"

"Oh, good." Her impulsive request that he read the directions aloud had come from a spontaneous desire to hear the language from a man's lips—she'd always thought French to be the premiere language of love. Her eyes drifted over his features. He had brown hair, neither short nor long, and a little messy, as if the wind had caught it on his way in.

The sharp turn of his freshly shaved jaw was his most masculine feature. A pair of scholarly glasses hid two magnificent blue eyes. They were a less intense blue than her siblings'—the color of faded denim, jeans gone soft from many washings.

"I guess your dignity is salvaged after all," he said as he stood.

He helped her to her feet, his hands engulfing hers with warmth. He let go as soon as she got her balance. He wasn't particularly tall, but at five two she barely reached his chin.

She glanced at her watch. “And in the nick of time.”

He lifted the stand with ease. “Where would you like me to put this?”

She directed him to the spot by the door, and he set it in place about an inch from the freshly painted wall.

It looked just as she had envisioned. “Perfect. Levi said you were a godsend, and for once he wasn’t exaggerating.”

“He did? I am? Who’s Levi?” He pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose in a gesture that was already becoming familiar. She hadn’t noticed his glasses slipping, but it was probably just a nervous habit. He did seem a little flustered.

Wait a minute. Molly blinked. “My brother, Levi? The one who asked you over to help me . . . He’s no fan of my dignity, but he owed me one.”

Adam shook his head. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know your brother; I just came to see about getting a room.”

Her lips parted as she froze. “Oh no. I’m so sorry! I’ve taken up half your afternoon.”

“It’s no problem at all.”

“And I can’t even give you a room. We’re not open yet.”

“I couldn’t help but notice all the construction. Is this place turn-of-the-century?”

“1905.”

“That makes sense. The architecture bears out the trend of the time—reviving previous styles from the nineteenth century. I noticed some regional characteristics—the roofline, for example—but also some eclectic flair brought over from abroad. Tourism of the time was broadening the scope of architecture in the US.”

Molly gave a bemused smile. “You must be an architect.”

A flush crawled up his neck. “No, actually, I’m not. Don’t mind me. I’m just full of useless information.”

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“You’re probably a whiz at Trivial Pursuit. But back to our situation with the inn . . . We were supposed to open this weekend but . . . life happened.”

“I was afraid of that. I’ve already checked every place I can think of. Everyone’s full up.”

“It’s the start of Memorial Day weekend—our busiest of the year. People book out months in advance—sometimes a whole year.”

“Well, that explains it. I actually booked a house on the lake, but there was a mistake with the reservation.”

“I feel so bad that we can’t accommodate you, especially after you went out of your way to help me.”

She thought of the two completed rooms upstairs sitting clean and ready. It was true the kitchen wasn’t finished, but they were only days away from completion. What could it hurt?

“Well, thanks anyway. It was nice meeting you, Molly.” He was already moving toward the door. Someone had closed it while they were working on the stand, and the air was getting a little stuffy.

“Wait,” she said. “Listen, maybe we can offer you a room for a night or two.”

“I’m actually planning to stay in town a while—through the end of July probably.”

“I see. Well, you could always move someplace else after the weekend. There’ll be plenty of vacancies starting Monday night.”

He shifted in the doorway. “Are you sure? I don’t want to be in the way.”

She gave him a wry look. “Have you looked around? *We’re* going to be in *your* way.”

His laugh was warm and mellow, pleasant. “At this point I’ll be happy to have a roof over my head.”

“There is a roof, but I can’t guarantee there won’t be people stomping across it. And saws buzzing, and hammering and whatnot. But

everything shuts down by supertime, and mornings usually don't start till eight or nine. Can you live with that?"

He gave a nod. "I'm grateful. Thank you."

"It's the least I could do after all your help."

As if on cue Grace burst through the front door, backpack swinging from her thin shoulders, wearing her volleyball clothes. Molly had completely missed the sound of her loud car pulling up to the house.

"Hey," Grace said in greeting. Her long blonde ponytail swung as she looked to the space where the new piece of furniture now stood. Her face fell.

"You owe me a cone," Molly said smugly. "Double scoop with sprinkles."

"Fine. But I got an A on my math test, so you have to pay for pizza tonight."

"Well worth it. Great job, kid." Molly high-fived her sister, then shifted her attention to Adam. "Grace, meet our first guest, Mr. Bradford. This is my sister, Grace, straight out of volleyball practice."

He extended his hand. "It's just Adam. Nice to meet you."

Molly found his shy demeanor inordinately appealing. Maybe because it was so different from Dominic's arrogance.

"You too," Grace said before addressing Molly. "I thought we weren't open yet."

"We're not exactly."

"She took pity on me," Adam said. "There's no place else to stay."

Molly and Grace exchanged a look. Yes, their brother was going to throw a fit, but Molly was willing to risk it after Adam had been so generous with his time.

"Are you sure it's all right?" Adam had apparently picked up on the unspoken message passing between the sisters.

"Absolutely. Let's get you checked in." Molly stepped behind the counter and opened the registration page.

LAKE SEASON

“Need some help with the system?” Grace joined her behind the counter, dropping her bag.

“I think I remember.” Molly went through the check-in process step by step, taking Adam’s credit card and having him sign in. She quoted what would be their regular rate and offered him 50 percent off for the inconvenience.

He thanked her as he pocketed his credit card.

Molly opened the antique cabinet and withdrew the key for room seven. “Here you are. Let me show you around, then I’ll take you to your room.”

“I have to get my bag. I’ll be right back.”

Molly watched through the picture window as he strode across the porch and down the steps. He was dressed business casual in khakis and a blue shirt. She wondered what he was doing at Bluebell Lake alone and for so long. The area attracted mainly couples and families with children who enjoyed frolicking at the beach and riding Jet Skis across the twelve-hundred-acre lake.

Grace nudged her. “What’s up with that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Levi’s going to have a conniption when he finds out we have a guest.”

Molly wiped the dust from the registration stand. “Oh well. This inn belongs to all of us, not just him.” She watched as Adam withdrew a suitcase from a small blue sedan. “He kind of looks like that actor from *The Notebook*, don’t you think?”

“Ryan Gosling? Are you kidding me?”

“Well . . . at the end of the movie, when he was all lovelorn and kind of scruffy looking.”

Grace snorted. “A nerdy Ryan Gosling maybe.”

“He’s not nerdy. Scholarly maybe.” Molly didn’t know why she felt the need to defend him. She watched him bump the car door shut and start making his way back to the house.

D E N I S E H U N T E R

“I think somebody’s smitten with our new guest.”

Molly rolled her eyes. “You know my heart belongs, now and forevermore, to Nathaniel Quinn.”

“Most women fall in love with the *heroes* of romance novels, not the authors.”

“Book boyfriends aren’t real; authors are.” Molly wagged her head at Grace and walked away.

t w o

Let's start with this side—it's not under construction." Molly beamed at Adam as he entered the foyer, her smile so warm and bright it could probably burn off the morning fog. He noticed a shallow dimple in her left cheek. "It's my first tour, so you'll have to be patient with me. Little warning: sometimes I talk too much."

Adam hitched his laptop bag higher on his shoulder. "I'm sure you'll do fine."

"I'll show you the library first. The dining room won't be of much use to you anyway. Where are you from, Mr. Bradford?"

"Adam, please. I'm from New York. I flew in early this morning, and I've been trying to find a vacancy ever since."

"Well, your search is over. You're a little ways from home."

"Yes, I am." He struggled for something else to say and came up empty.

Molly seemed awfully young to be running an inn. He followed her to the left of the stand and down a short hall. This part of the house seemed untouched by the construction. It featured the high ceilings of a bygone area, original mahogany woodwork, and squeaky wood floors.

"So what's the history behind this place?" he asked.

"Well, as I said before, it was built in 1905," she said over her shoulder. "Bluebell's first inn. Early on it became a stagecoach stop,

and it's been many things over the years, including a saloon, if you can believe it. It was even a post office for a while. In the sixties—the lake's real heyday—other hotels opened, but the Bluebell Inn remained *the* place to stay.

“Unfortunately, the area declined in popularity in the seventies, and the inn was purchased by the governor's family and made into a summer home. They lived here until my parents bought it. My siblings and I grew up here.”

“If only the walls could talk,” he said. “I'll bet they'd have some good stories.”

Her smile widened. “I know, right? The last innkeeper's wife kept a journal, though, and we have it right here in our library. Fascinating stuff and as close to talking walls as we're going to get, I'm afraid.”

Maybe he'd find a spark there. Although the sixties weren't really his sweet spot.

Molly continued her tour. “The Bluebell Inn—we've kept the original name, by the way—has the distinction of being the only hotel that's both downtown *and* on the lake. The best of both worlds.”

“Convenient for me, for certain. So your parents own the inn then?”

Her smile faltered just a split second before she bolstered it. “That was their plan for retirement . . . but I'm afraid they passed away last summer. My siblings and I are opening it on our own now.”

He stopped just shy of the room she'd entered, wishing he could call back his question. “I'm so sorry.” He wanted to say more. That he was impressed by her resolve and commitment. By her strength. But uncertainty made the words congeal in his throat.

“Thank you.” She gestured him inside the room.

It was about twelve by fifteen, had wall-to-wall shelves, a dark leather sofa and coffee table, and an old desk situated in front of a large picture window.

LAKE SEASON

“I never asked what brought you to Bluebell,” she said. “Business or pleasure?”

“Business.” He smiled politely and began looking around, not really wanting to expound. It got tricky sometimes, protecting his anonymity.

“Oh, all right. Well, let me know if I can be of service in any way. I know most everyone around here, and sometimes connections are everything.”

“I’m not really . . . That is, my work is more solitary. I’ll be going to the library a lot.”

“Oh!” Her eyebrows popped as her lovely eyes lit up. “Are you researching the area? We have some really fascinating town history, and I could connect you to some people.”

“Yes, research. Exactly.” That much was true. He needed to find a plot somewhere, quickly, and that’s where it had always started before.

“I’ve read every book on the subject. If I can be of help, let me know. Speaking of which . . .” She gestured around the room they’d entered. “Our library. We actually have several good books on the area.”

He followed her to a shelf on the far side of the room, taking in the musty smell of old books. It was too warm in the room. Or perhaps he was only nervous. His damp palms were slippery on the handle of his bag.

She set her hand on the hardback spines of a few old tomes. “The downtown library doesn’t have all of these, and you’re more than welcome to help yourself. We have books on the town’s history and a few on the regional history. I’m not sure which you’re interested in.”

“All of it, actually. Thank you. I’m sure I’ll find these helpful.” He browsed the adjacent section. *Desiring God*, *Mere Christianity*, and *Love Does*, among others. “Good books.”

“You’ve read them?”

“All but *Anxious for Nothing*.”

She dropped her hands to the pockets of her shorts. “Well, you’re welcome to them as well. And if you find yourself in need of a quiet space to work on-site, this would be your best bet. The construction is on the other side of the house. It’ll probably be quieter than your room. There’s the patio too, and it’s in the shade. But it can get pretty hot out there even in late May.”

He took in the view of the lake through the picture window. A shaded lawn stretched down to the grassy shore where a wooden pier jutted out into the water. A small metal boat, tied to the end, bobbed in the wake of a passing pontoon. He turned to take in the rest of the room. “I can’t imagine a better place to work or read.”

“I know. My brother wanted to turn it into a guest room. Can you imagine? He’s all dollars and cents.”

“I’m glad you kept it as it is. I may use it a bit tomorrow, if I won’t be in your way.”

“Not at all. That’s what it’s here for.”

“Do you live on the premises?” he asked. Muse or no, she might be a little distracting.

“Yes, all three of us do. My sister and I share a room, and my brother took the maid’s room off the kitchen.”

He stopped by a wall of shelves that housed a generous fiction section.

“As you can see, we’re well-stocked in fiction, too, if you enjoy reading novels.”

“I do.” His eyes scanned the shelves, finding everything from the classics—Austen, Dickens, Twain, Brontë—to the contemporary genres of mystery, thriller, sci-fi, and romance.

“My dad liked to read a bit of everything, but I primarily read women’s fiction and romance—you probably don’t read those genres.”

LAKE SEASON

“I sometimes do. Actually, men account for 19 percent of those who read romance novels.”

“You don’t say.”

“Of course science fiction is the most popular genre for men at 69 percent, followed by crime and thriller at 62.”

She blinked at him.

And still his mouth kept moving. “Overall about 47 percent of Americans read fiction. It was on the rise from 2002 to 2008, but it’s been dropping slowly ever since. Men are more likely to read nonfiction than women though.” *Shut up, Adam.* He pressed his lips together.

Her head tilted, studying him as if maybe he was an alien from one of those sci-fi novels. “Interesting.”

Not to normal people.

His eyes suddenly fell on a series of familiar spines. On the name spanning their lengths. His throat tightened uncomfortably, constricting his airway.

He hitched his bag on his shoulder and moved away from the shelves, distancing himself from the books. He made a beeline toward the door, hoping all his blood hadn’t rushed into his face.

She stopped talking suddenly—his first clue she’d been speaking at all. And he’d rudely walked away. *Smooth, Bradford.*

“I’m so sorry,” she blurted out before he could figure out what to say. “Here you are, lugging around your heavy bag while I rattle on about books. Let me show you up to your room.”

He hated that he’d made her feel bad but couldn’t think of a thing to say that didn’t involve random statistics or irrelevant details. So he just followed her back down the hall, around the check-in desk, and up the staircase, while she filled the silence with her lovely chatter.

He found her gift of gab charming and was envious of her easy way with people. She’d do well as an innkeeper, despite her youth.

She wasn't *that* young, and though he'd barely reached thirty himself, he'd always felt older than he actually was.

At the top of the steps they took a left, and he followed her down the hallway. The faint smell of new carpet welcomed him. Wall sconces shed golden light on the space and made copper highlights sparkle in Molly's dark hair. Her white top billowed behind her, reaching just past the waistline of her shorts.

Whoever her parents were, they would be proud of her, he thought with sudden sentimentality. He of all people knew how important that was. He hoped he might find the opportunity, and the words, to tell her that before they parted ways.

"Here we are," she said as they turned a corner. The white five-panel door bore many coats of paint and featured the old-style glass knobs. The skeleton keyhole was still in place, but a deadbolt had been installed above it.

She stepped aside so he could unlock the door.

"It's all made up," she said. "But you'll have to adjust the air. I'll be making up the room each day whenever you slip out."

He blinked at her, the idea of her entering his personal space both disconcerting and pleasant.

"Molly . . ." A male voice shouted from down the hall as Adam carried his bags inside. "Where are you?"

"Be right there." Her voice was rushed as she backed away. "If you need anything, please let me know."

Before he could respond a man rounded the corner. He was a few inches taller than Adam with the build of a wide receiver, rugged in paint-stained jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt. He looked like someone Adam might cast as a hero in one of his novels—tall, dark, and handsome. Intelligence—and disapproval—sparkled in his clear blue eyes.

"Hey, Levi," Molly said, her hands searching for a place to land. "What do you need?"

LAKE SEASON

Levi's gaze moved between them, his brows drawing together as they landed on Adam's suitcase. "Hello."

"Hello."

"Um, Adam," Molly said, "this is my brother, Levi. Levi . . . this is our first guest, Adam Bradford." Her injected enthusiasm fooled no one.

Levi's gaze swung back to his sister, and Adam would've had to be clueless to miss the instant thread of tension drawing tight between them.

"Adam's in the area doing research," Molly said, obviously trying to fill the awkward silence. "He'll be staying until Monday."

Levi gave Adam a polite smile. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Is everything all right?"

"Absolutely," Molly said enthusiastically. "Fine and dandy."

Levi's pointed gaze swung back to his sister. "Molly . . . might I have a word with you downstairs?"