

PRAISE FOR DENISE HUNTER

“Denise Hunter has never failed to pen a novel that whispers messages of hope and brings a smile to my face. *Bookshop by the Sea* is no different! With a warmhearted community, a small beachside town, a second-chance romance worth rooting for, and cozy bookshop vibes, this is a story you’ll want to snuggle into like a warm blanket.”

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“*Autumn Skies* is the perfect roundup to the Bluebell Inn series. The tension and attraction between Grace and Wyatt is done so well, and the mystery kept me wondering what was going to happen next. Prepare to be swept away to the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains in a flurry of turning pages.”

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“*Summer by the Tides* is a perfect blend of romance and women’s fiction.”

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“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. If you like Robyn Carr, you’ll love Denise Hunter.”

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AUTHOR OF *BEFORE WE WERE YOURS*

R I V E R B E N D

Gap

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R I V E R B E N D

Gap

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



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Riverbend Gap

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Publisher's Note: This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hunter, Denise, 1968- author.

Title: *Riverbend Gap* / Denise Hunter.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee : Thomas Nelson, [2021] | Series: Riverbend romance ; 1 | Summary: "From the bestselling author of *The Convenient Groom* (now a beloved Hallmark Original movie) comes the first romance in a brand-new series! When Deputy Cooper Robinson happens upon a car balanced on the edge of a cliff, he does everything he can think of to distract the distraught driver from her perilous situation—up to and including sharing things he's never disclosed to anyone. Likewise, an agitated Katie Loveland opens up to the deputy, and by the time she's rescued, she's formed an intense bond with the man. The traumatic accident makes Katie late to her first dinner with her boyfriend's family. Only then does she discover that the charming deputy who saved her life is also her boyfriend's brother. In the aftermath, both Katie and Cooper must decide what to do with their newfound vulnerability and emotional connection . . . And the decision they make could change everything"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021021194 (print) | LCCN 2021021195 (ebook) | ISBN 9780785240501 (paperback) | ISBN 9780785240518 (epub) | ISBN 9780785240525

Subjects: BISAC: FICTION / Christian / Romance / General | FICTION / Romance / Clean & Wholesome | GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3608.U5925 R58 2021 (print) | LCC PS3608.U5925 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021021194>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021021195>

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 5 4 3 2 1

Author Note

Dear friend,

I'm always so excited to start writing a new series! This one is centered around a North Carolina town on the Appalachian Trail and a particular family who lives there, the Robinsons.

I first envisioned this series when I was in Georgia, researching the Blue Ridge series. Quite by accident I found out that the Appalachian Trail started in a nearby town, so I decided to check it out. From there I became more curious about the trail. I learned that the AT is over two thousand miles long, and each year three million people hike some portion of it. More than four thousand of those are thru-hikers (walking from Georgia to Maine), but only one in four complete the journey due to injury, illness, weather, or lack of perseverance. Some are seeking an adventurous challenge or looking to escape the stress of city life. Others want to go off the grid or are simply looking to heal a broken heart.

AUTHOR NOTE

Along the trail there are towns that cater to and encourage these thru-hikers in their formidable quest. One such town is Hot Springs, North Carolina, the inspiration for my fictional town, Riverbend Gap.

I hope you enjoy learning about the AT, and I hope you come to love this trail town and the characters who live there as much as I do.

Blessings!
Denise

This is going to leave a bruise.

Katelyn Loveland stomped on the brakes of her Honda Civic. Upon impact her air bag would deploy, collide with her face, and she'd look like a monster when she met her boyfriend's family.

She jerked the wheel to the left. "No, no, no!" The squeal of tires merged with her shriek.

She missed the deer by inches.

Thank You, Jesus!

Her tires slipped off the shoulder. She turned the wheel but overcorrected. Her breath caught on an exhale.

Then she was spinning, spinning. The world swirled: green, brown, blue. Dread sank in bone-deep. Katie braced for certain impact with a guardrail, a tree, the mountain. Braced for the air bag, the pain, the aforementioned bruising.

Instead branches clawed the car like a bear, scratching, scraping. The car jilted forward. A scream.

Then a jarring halt.

She looked up, breaths ragged. Unpeeled her fingers from the wheel. Leaned back in her seat, head spinning. Throbbing. She touched her temple, and her fingertips came away red and sticky. She must've hit the steering wheel. Her air bag hadn't deployed after all.

Okay. I'm okay.

She drew in a full breath and assessed. The engine hissed. Smoke curled heavenward. The engine wasn't running. She reached trembling fingers for the key and turned it.

Nothing.

So she wouldn't pull up to the house in a wrecked car—she touched her forehead again—with a head injury. But she would be bruised *and* late. So much for a good first impression. She needed to call her boyfriend; he'd have to come get her.

Her phone was in her purse—which was where? There, on the passenger-side floor, contents scattered. She unbuckled her seat belt and reached for the phone.

The car shifted farther forward.

She froze, heart stuttering. *Forget the phone.* What was happening? Why was the car unbalanced? Dare she move?

Slowly, not so much as breathing, she straightened in her seat. Dear God, what was going on?

She peered through the front windshield. The murky blue of the late-afternoon sky seemed to go on forever. She dared to lean forward an inch, two, breath held, eyes seeking the ground in front of her.

But it wasn't there.

Cooper Robinson leaned into the curve, the motor of his Triumph Street Twin humming beneath him. The hot August wind

ripped past, the smell of pine permeated the air. Riding brought him a sense of calm and ease, a feeling of freedom. The sound of the motor and vibration of the bike were like oxygen to his soul. Riding was his therapy. His thoughts were full of family today, though, and that didn't exactly jive with the whole calm and ease vibe he sought.

His brother, Gavin, in particular weighed heavily on his mind, as he had often since Gavin's divorce last year. Earlier than that really—since the death of Gavin's young son. The two tragic events were like links in a chain, one leading right to the next.

When Gavin had moved home the Robinsons circled the wagons to comfort and support him. Not that it did much good. He'd only lately begun to come around—but not because of his family's efforts.

Cooper accelerated through another turn, trying to regain the calm and ease thing. Normally nothing cleared his mind like a ride through the mountains surrounding Riverbend Gap, a town tucked deeply into the Appalachian Mountains.

Coming out of the turn, he straightened the bike, his gaze locking on skid marks on the road just ahead. Saw them all the time on these winding roads—tourists misjudged the hairpin turns despite the traffic signs.

But these skid marks were on a straightaway, and they were new; no accidents had been reported here. Probably a deer or other wildlife, judging by the deceleration marks on the pavement. Despite the lack of a carcass, he slowed his bike and kept his eyes peeled for the car.

Something had disturbed the gravel on the shoulder. Intermittent skid marks marred the pavement just beyond. Someone had lost control.

And there, just ahead to the left—flattened brush about the width of a car.

He slowed further and rolled up to the scene. Tire tracks led through the foliage. Small car, he guessed, based on the size of the tracks in the mud. A sinking feeling weighted his gut—just beyond the scrub lay a formidable cliff.

He pulled well off the road to avoid causing another accident, dismounted, and removed his helmet. The emergency was probably over, only an investigation—and likely a funeral—remaining. But he withdrew his phone anyway as he scrambled through the brush.

No cell signal. And being off duty he had no radio.

A flash of silver caught his eye. He pocketed his phone and scuttled through the dense thicket. Branches poked him in the neck and scraped his arms, but he forged on, homing in on the car. Honda Civic, not running. North Carolina plate. Rear wheels—oh jeez—several inches off the ground.

“Hello?” He pushed through the low-growing brush alongside the vehicle. “Can you hear me?”

“I—I hear you,” a woman replied.

“Don’t move. I’m coming.” He shoved aside a branch and inched forward until he was beside the car. Then he knelt and assessed the situation.

The front tires had cleared the edge of the cliff. The nose of the sedan pointed downward, the car balancing on its frame. The vehicle and its occupant would’ve plunged to the bottom of the ravine—some fifty feet—if not for a lone tree growing from the cliffside. The tree had broken off at some point and now stood about five feet tall. It hardly seemed sturdy enough to support the weight of the car.

One little movement could send the thing crashing to the ravine below.

“*Don’t move.*” Cooper stood and approached the driver’s side. He appraised her through the partly open window. Midtwenties,

blonde, petite. Small cut on forehead. She stared, stricken, out the windshield.

“It’s going to be okay. My name’s Cooper. What’s yours?”

“Katelyn. Can—can you get me out?” Her voice trembled. “I can’t open the door.”

“I’m a sheriff’s deputy, Katelyn. I’m going to get you out of here, but I might need your help.” His gaze fell to the door where the car had wedged against a large rock, leaving a dent. “This door’s jammed. Do you have a phone?”

“I—yes. It’s down there, on the floor.”

“Sit tight, okay? I’ll go around the other side and grab it.” Hopefully it had a signal—though it was unlikely since his didn’t.

He made his way around the vehicle as quickly as possible. When he reached the other side, he found the door accessible.

“I’m going to open the door and fetch your phone.” Cautiously, he reached for the handle and slowly pulled until it was open. So far, so good. He reached for the phone, careful not to put any weight on the car. Once he retrieved it he checked for a signal.

He looked back at Katelyn who stared at him as if he was her last hope. “No signal.”

He wasn’t sure the car was stable enough for a safe evacuation, but he didn’t have a chain or even a rope to secure it. He had to extract her before that tree gave way.

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. You’re going to very slowly climb over the console.”

Fear blazed in her wide blue eyes. “I’m afraid to move. When I reached for my phone, the car tipped forward.”

“You’re going to keep your weight against the seat back this time. Once you’re over the console, I’ll snatch you right out of there. You can do this, Katelyn.”

Her expression shifted, her eyes growing determined, her jaw setting. She gave a nod, then slowly lifted her leg. She swung it

over the emergency brake, over the gearshift. On a steady exhale she lowered her foot until it dangled on the other side. Her pulse leaped in her throat.

“Good job, Katelyn. You’re doing great. Now I need you to lift yourself up on the console. Keep your weight back.”

“O—okay.” She put a hand on the console, paused for a beat. Then she began lifting her weight, back pressed to the seat.

“That’s it. You’ve got this.” A few inches more and he could reach her. He’d be quick about it, and even if the car—

The vehicle groaned, shifting forward.

Katelyn screamed.

Cooper flung his body onto the trunk. The back of the car sank a couple inches and stabilized. He expelled a breath. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck.

“Hello?” Her voice quivered. “Are you still there?”

“I’m here. It’s okay. Everything’s going to be fine.”

He could have her evacuate while he weighted the rear. But even now the back wheels were suspended above the ground. He could feel the car wavering beneath him.

The car was in too precarious a position for her to move around. He needed a rescue wench. Which meant he needed a fire truck. Which meant he’d have to go for help.

“I’m going to ease off the car, okay, Katelyn? It might move a little, but you’re not going anywhere.” *Please, God.*

“Okay.” Her whispered prayers carried on the wind.

Cooper lowered his body until his feet touched the ground. Slowly, he removed his weight from the car. It bobbed beneath him like a fishing float.

Katelyn gasped.

Please God, he begged again as he carefully withdrew the last of his weight. The vehicle tottered slightly, then settled like an equally balanced scale.

He made his way back to the driver's side. "Katelyn, you still with me?"

"Yes." She was back in the driver's seat, pressed back as far as she could go, staring through the windshield.

"Are your windows automatic?"

"Yes. Is now a good time to tell you I'm afraid of heights?"

"You're not going to fall, Katelyn."

"How—how big a drop is it? Are we talking your basic ravine or Half Dome?"

"Now see, you gotta have more faith in me than that. You're hurting my feelings."

She glanced at him, a flicker of humor in her eyes.

"We're going to fasten your seat belt, okay? Let me do it." He reached inside the window and grabbed the buckle. Then he stretched it across her, leaning in. The scent of her enveloped him—oranges and sunshine. He focused on the task when what he really wanted to do was study her face. The buckle slid into place with a click.

He leaned back, locking his gaze on hers. "All right, there we go. Listen, Katelyn . . . I'm going to need you to sit tight while I go for help."

"No. Don't go, please."

"We have no phone," he continued calmly. "And I have no way of securing the car."

The look she turned on him melted him into a puddle. "Please don't leave me."

"I'll just go as far as the road. Flag someone down and send them for help. I won't be far away, and I won't be gone long." The road got a decent amount of traffic. But the day was wearing on, and he hadn't heard a car pass yet.

Her eyes closed, her dark lashes fanning the tops of her cheeks. Her chest rose and fell fast, and her hands clutched the sides of the seat, knuckles blanched.

“Katelyn.” He leaned down until his face was inches from hers. “I need you to listen to me.”

Her eyes opened, vulnerable and afraid, and clung to his.

“Let me do my job, okay? I happen to be pretty good at it. As soon as I flag someone down I’ll be right back. You’ll keep me company, right?”

“I’m—I’m not exactly going anywhere.” Her lips wobbled in an attempted smile.

“That’s the spirit. I’ll be back soon.” He gave her a confident nod and started back through the thicket. “Think of all the things you’re going to tell me. I want to know everything about you—grisly details, skeletons in the closet, all the good stuff, okay?”

“Okay,” she called.

But he could barely hear her now. He was past the car and moving as quickly as he could, all the while thinking that the car—and its sweet little occupant—could plunge to the valley floor at any second.

“All right, God, it’s like this . . .” Katie whispered, unclenched her fists, careful to remain perfectly still otherwise. “I’m at Your complete and total mercy. I know, I know. That’s always been true but . . . I’m quite literally hanging on the edge of a cliff here, God.”

The late-afternoon heat had infiltrated the car, and sweat beaded on the back of her neck. There was no breeze, but she should probably be thankful for that. A stiff wind might just blow her right off the overhang. Her stomach turned at the thought. This was so, *so* much worse than the scary roller coasters her brother used to drag her on.

She was going to be fine. The deputy would come back with help. How long had he been gone anyway? Seemed like an hour, but it was probably only minutes. She closed her eyes, conscious of every breath—it might be her last after all.

No, no, she couldn’t think like that. Happy thoughts. Positive

thoughts. The deputy's steady eyes. Confident demeanor. Capable hands. Yes, that was better. He'd be back soon. This was his job, right?

Her head began to spin. She gasped for air. This was not a good time to hyperventilate.

Get a grip, Katelyn Elizabeth Wallace.

Of course, it was Loveland now—she'd changed her last name when she turned eighteen. But it was her foster mom's voice in her head, the familiar full-name warning. The remembrance nearly brought a smile to her face as she worked to slow her breathing.

In through the nose, out through the mouth. Once. Twice. Three times.

Beyond the windshield a hawk swooped into her line of vision, its red tail translucent in the sunlight. It soared, wings spread wide, lofted by the air, then swooped down, headed somewhere below. Possibly far, far below.

Why was this happening now, when she was finally making a fresh start? When she'd found a new town, a new home, a job she loved, and a good man?

Something trickled down her temple—blood. But she was too afraid to wipe it away. Best she sat tight and hoped for a lifeline. Where was Superman when you needed him?

A bird tweeted from a nearby branch. She would focus on sounds. She closed her eyes again, gladly blocking out the great abyss stretching out in front of her. The leaves overhead swished. A squirrel nattered nearby. A tree trunk creaked.

Branches snapped and underbrush rustled. The sounds grew louder.

“Deputy? Is that you?”

“It's me. Thanks for waiting.”

Relief coursed through her veins. “I almost ditched you, but I'm not that kind of woman.”

“Knew I was right about you.” He appeared outside her window, eyes twinkling.

“Is help on the way? Please say yes. That’s really the only acceptable answer.”

“Lucky for me that I flagged a guy down then. He’s headed toward the valley, and he’ll call for help as soon as he gets a signal.”

The valley was twenty minutes away. Her stomach plunged.

“What’s wrong? Afraid I’ll bore you with childhood stories?” He sat on a rock just outside her door, elbows on his knees as if he were perched on a porch instead of the cliff’s edge. “The Riverbend Fire Department will be here before you know it. They’re always ready to show off. We might not even have time to become properly acquainted.”

He was really handsome with that crooked grin. Dark-brown hair, just long enough on top to be unruly (and littered with debris at the moment). Brown eyes set deeply beneath prominent brows. A square jawline, the amount of stubble riding the line between five o’clock shadow and beard.

Well, she’d wanted a distraction.

She thought of her boyfriend and winced. She was supposed to be there by now—she’d updated him on her progress only fifteen minutes before the accident. He’d be worried, and she had no way to notify him.

She’d just had to get her hair done, hadn’t she?

“So, what do you have for me?” Cooper asked.

“What?”

“You were going to give me all the dirt, remember?”

“I recall the conversation but, sad to say, I’m fresh out of dirt.”

“What do you do for a living, Katelyn?”

“I’m a nurse. If I had the tools handy I could stitch up my own forehead.”

He leaned in, studying her wound. “I don’t think it’s going to

need them. You'll have a heck of a bruise though. And probably a headache. Where were you coming from? Walnut? Marshall?"

"Asheville. My old hair salon—big mistake."

His gaze roved over her carefully curled beach waves. "Doesn't look like a mistake to me."

Something fluttered in her stomach. "Well, it ended with me on the edge of a cliff so . . ."

"Asheville . . . That where your family's from?"

"I don't have any family to speak of."

"No parents? Siblings?"

"I have foster parents and a lot of foster siblings." She paused before going on. "I had a brother—we were really close."

"Tell me about him."

She didn't normally talk about her brother. Then again, she didn't normally hang on the edge of a cliff. "His name was Spencer. He was my best friend. He was a private person, kind of a loner. But once you got to know him . . . he was a softy on the inside. And so creative—he could just pick up an instrument and teach himself to play it."

"Sounds like someone I could call friend."

She smiled. That was just the right thing to say. "What about your family? Are they from around here?"

"They are. We're close, though my siblings are a pain in the butt sometimes."

"Where do you fall in the lineup?"

"Dead center."

"Ah . . . the middle child."

"We're not all jealous and needy. Was your brother older or younger?"

"Younger by two years."

"Which makes you the oldest child. Are you driven and compulsive, Katelyn? Always right?"

“I guess I bucked the trend too. My upbringing probably had something to do with that. Having a dozen or so foster siblings tends to disrupt the natural order of things. Aw, don’t look at me like that. My brother and I were loved. The Clemsons were good people—we landed there when I was eight. They run a gas station in Asheville.”

At the thought of Jill and James, her stomach twisted. She’d gone into town for a haircut and hadn’t even made time to see them. Had she ever told them how much their love and support meant to her? To Spencer?

“I’m a terrible person,” she muttered.

“What?”

She lowered her lids in a slow blink. “Can you open Notes on my phone?”

“Is this where you tell me all your dirty secrets?” He pulled the phone from his pocket, touched the screen, then looked up at her, waiting.

“I want to leave my foster parents a note.”

The humor fled his eyes. He scowled, lowering the phone. “You don’t need to leave a note. You can tell them whatever you want the next time you see them.”

She couldn’t leave things unsaid. Not after all they’d done for her. “Please.”

He gave her a long, searching look. Then his eyes softened to melted chocolate, and he let out a resigned sigh. “All right. But you’re going to feel silly when you open your phone later and see this.”

She collected her thoughts as he stared down at the phone, thumbs poised. Then she began, speaking slowly enough for him to keep up.

“Dear Jill and James, I don’t have words to express how much you’ve meant to me. You took us in when we had nothing and no one. You loved us as your own.”

Her eyes stung. She cleared her throat. “I’ll never forget helping you make peanut butter cookies in the kitchen on Saturdays, Jill. Even now it’s my favorite cookie because of all the precious memories it represents.” She paused. “Is that stupid?”

“No.” His voice was rough. He returned his attention to the phone.

“Jim . . . You had the patience to teach me to drive and even change a flat. You’re a legend for that and so many other reasons. Christmases in your living room, countless meals around your dining room table, prayers by my bed. You are the center of my best memories, and I love you more than words can say.” She paused for a beat. “That’s it. Just sign my name.”

After she spelled it for him, he pocketed the phone. Then he held her gaze for a drawn-out moment. Something passed between them. She’d just bared her heart to a stranger, and he seemed to understand.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome. Now, can we stop being so maudlin and get on with the fun stuff? I bet we can find people in common. I know some folks from Asheville: David Young, Evelyn Murdock, Richard Lewis—”

“Richard was my pastor. He’s a good guy.”

“I’ve never been to his church, but yeah. Good guy. So you’re a believer.”

“I am.” She studied his face, something softening inside. She’d known there was something special about him. “So if I, you know, fall off this cliff and die in a fiery crash, at least you’ll know I’m headed to heaven.”

“Now, now, no martyr’s death for you. You’ll more likely die in your sleep at the ripe, old age of ninety, having told your children and grandchildren all about your narrow escape from death and the handsome deputy who rescued you.”

“You call this a rescue, Deputy? So far you’ve only flagged down a vehicle and asked a bunch of nosy questions. And let’s not forget, I’m still hanging on the edge of said cliff.”

His lips turned up, almost a smile. “So you do think I’m handsome?”

Laughter bubbled out of her. “If you’re asking if I prefer to look at you instead of the sheer drop-off in front of me, then yes. And should you really be flirting while you’re on the job?”

“Technically, I’m off duty.”

“Yes, well, technically I have a—”

The car pitched forward and whatever she’d been about to say died abruptly in her throat.