

## PRAISE FOR DENISE HUNTER

“A poignant romance that’s perfect for fans of emotional love stories that capture your heart from the very first page. With her signature style, Denise Hunter whisks readers into a world where broken hearts are mended, lives are changed, and love really does conquer all!”

—*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

COURTNEY WALSH, ON *MULBERRY HOLLOW*

“Hunter delivers a touching story of how family dynamics and personal priorities shift when love takes precedence. Hunter’s fans will love this.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* ON *RIVERBEND GAP*

“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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“Sophie and Aiden had me hooked from page one, and I was holding my breath until the very end. Denise nails second-chance romance in *Bookshop by the Sea*. I adored this story! Five giant stars!”

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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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AUTHOR OF *CHRISTMAS ANGELS*

“*Carolina Breeze* is filled with surprises, enchantment, and a wonderful depth of romance. Denise Hunter gets better with every novel she writes, and that trend has hit a high point with this wonderful story.”

—HANNAH ALEXANDER, AUTHOR OF *THE WEDDING KISS*

“A breeze of brilliance! Denise Hunter’s *Carolina Breeze* will blow you away with a masterful merge of mystery, chemistry, and memories restored in this lakeside love story of faith, family, and fortune.”

—JULIE LESSMAN, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

“*Summer by the Tides* is 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. If you like Robyn Carr, you’ll love Denise Hunter.”

—COLLEEN COBLE, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF *ONE LITTLE LIE*

“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  
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“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, FOR *HONEYSUCKLE DREAMS*

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“*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.”

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—LISA WINGATE, #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF *BEFORE WE WERE YOURS*



MULBERRY

*Hollow*

## ALSO BY DENISE HUNTER

### The Riverbend Romance Novels

*Riverbend Gap*

*Mulberry Hollow*

*Harvest Moon* (available

September 2022)

### The Bluebell Inn Novels

*Lake Season*

*Carolina Breeze*

*Autumn Skies*

### The Blue Ridge Novels

*Blue Ridge Sunrise*

*Honeysuckle Dreams*

*On Magnolia Lane*

### The 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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### Nantucket Love Stories

*Surrender Bay*

*The Convenient Groom*

*Seaside Letters*

*Driftwood Lane*

### Stand-Alone Novels

*Bookshop by the Sea*

*Summer by the Tides*

*Sweetbriar Cottage*

*Sweetwater Gap*

### Novellas included in

*This Time Around, Smitten,*

*Secretly Smitten, and*

*Smitten Book Club*

MULBERRY  
*Hollow*

A RIVERBEND ROMANCE

DENISE HUNTER



*Mulberry Hollow*

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# One

Two glaring realizations flashed through Wes Garrett's mind as he blinked against the morning sunlight: he was alone in the camping shelter, and he was soaked to the skin. A few other insights struck—his head throbbed, his muscles ached, and despite the July heat, chills racked his body.

He groaned and rolled over, pushing off the sleeping bag. He labored to draw a full breath. He should just go back to sleep. Why was this happening now, with only a couple of weeks of his two-month hike remaining?

He thought of Lillian, awaiting him in Albany, New York. Thought of his best friend Landon and their plan to complete the Appalachian Trail after their return to the US. Thought of Landon's last moments before he died in the Colombian dirt—in Wes's place.

So could he lie here in the shelter and give in to the oblivion of sleep? No. He would push through for his friend. He'd overcome much worse than this.

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Resolved, he sat up, the floorboards of the raised shelter creaking beneath him. His head spun from the motion, and he blinked against the salty sting of sweat in his eyes, recalling the coughing man he'd slept next to a few nights ago. *Thanks a lot, buddy.*

The sunlight glinted through the trees in the clearing. Had to be going on ten at least. He hadn't once slept past six on the trail. The three hikers he'd shared the shelter with were long gone, the only evidence of their existence a ghostly curl of smoke rising from the firepit.

He was on his own.

He swallowed against a dry, sore throat and reached for his water. He had to get moving. He'd feel better once he had some food and coffee in his system. He'd make it at least as far as the next town, then reassess. Thoughts of a shower, a real mattress, and a home-cooked meal pushed him to his feet.

But twenty minutes later all his optimism faded and grim reality settled in. Getting dressed and fed had bled him of his energy, and Riverbend Gap was still fourteen rigorous miles away.

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Avery Robinson had spent her entire adulthood dreading her thirtieth birthday—and it had finally arrived. She winced as her family, gathered around the picnic table, belted out the “Happy Birthday” song. Terrific family, stellar people, but singers they were not.

Avery's stepmom, Lisa, blonde hair pulled back from her pretty face, set the cake (really, a brownie) in front of Avery.

Thirty candles flickered in the July breeze, lighting up the night like a bonfire.

Her oldest stepbrother, Gavin, hit a note well out of his range, making her snort. Her other stepbrother, Cooper, gave him an aggrieved look. Cooper was the only reason the song was half recognizable. His fiancée, Katie—also Avery’s best friend since college—leaned forward, her long, honey-colored hair swinging over her shoulder as the song (thank God) came to a close.

“Gosh, guys.” Avery grimaced. “Thanks a lot.”

Dad’s eyes crinkled in that Kiefer Sutherland way. “Make a wish, sweetheart.”

“She’ll probably waste it on a doctor for the clinic,” Cooper said.

“Wish for a man,” Katie blurted. “But be specific. Good sense of humor. Good looks, gainfully employed . . .”

“Willing to put up with a workaholic,” Cooper added.

“Who has a mountain of books on her nightstand.”

Lisa gave her sons a mock scowl. “All right, boys, be nice. It’s her birthday.”

“The only man I want is one who holds a medical degree and who’s willing to live in a tiny mountain town. And accepts carriage-house accommodations as partial salary,” Avery added offhandedly.

“Have you seen your carriage house?” Cooper raised an eyebrow.

“Have you seen this town?” Gavin added.

“Hey . . . ,” the rest of the family chorused.

“Anyone would be lucky to live here, doctor or no,” Lisa said.

Gavin pushed his black hair off his forehead, exposing

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bright-blue eyes. “Which is why she’s had so many responses to her ads.”

“Hmm, let’s see . . .” Cooper squinted his brown eyes. “Six-figure salary and fancy penthouse or shoebox with faulty plumbing.”

“The plumbing works just fine, thank you very much.”

“Honey,” Dad said, “if having another doc will reduce your hours, you go ahead and wish for one.”

“Absolutely.” Lisa rubbed her shoulder. “You’re wearing yourself out, and you really don’t need that.”

It was as close as anyone had come to mentioning the significance of her thirtieth birthday. Avery stared at her blazing brownie-cake, giving her wish further consideration while the family weighed in on Avery’s workload. She didn’t really believe in wishes, but as Gavin had so kindly reminded them, her ads—and numerous prayers—didn’t seem to be working.

She’d planned to wait until next year to hire another doctor for her clinic, until she’d had time and money to renovate the carriage house. But the long hours were getting to her—and then there was that fateful night back in April.

Her gaze drifted to her dad, sitting catty-corner to her and fully engaged in the conversation. His color was good tonight, and he seemed in high spirits. They’d come so close to losing him—and it was all her fault. That helpless panic she’d experienced as a child had rushed back, making her chest hollow and achy. Only this time she was an adult, a doctor. She should’ve been here for him.

“All right, everybody, the candles are melting.” Lisa’s words jolted Avery from the terrible memory. “Make a wish, sweetheart.”

Avery dredged up a smile as she eyed the candles. It was her

birthday wish, and daggonit, she did need another doctor. Her family was correct about one thing: she couldn't continue at her current pace. She drew in a lungful of oxygen and blew out all thirty candles in one long breath.

Gravel popped under the Jeep tires as Avery backed from her parents' long drive. The smile she'd forced all evening had melted away the second she slipped from the house. Her dad had wilted as the evening wore on. He tried to hide it, but there was no fooling Avery.

The two stents had seemed to do the trick, and his cardiologist was optimistic the problem had been resolved (she'd all but harassed the man for details on several occasions). But hearts and their arteries could be tricky.

She drew in a deep breath and released it, counting to ten. He would be fine. She would never again leave him—or the rest of the community—vulnerable by leaving town. Not until she had another doctor in place. Maybe she'd win one of those grants she was applying for so she could actually offer a living wage.

Minutes later she drove through town, deserted since they rolled up the sidewalk by eight o'clock. She passed the church and headed toward the campground, which Gavin managed, and finally entered the heavily wooded side of town known as Mulberry Hollow. The road curved and twisted alongside the river, and the full moon cast a ghostly glow over the treetops. On the other side of the river, the Appalachian Mountains rose to rounded peaks, silhouetted against the evening sky.

To some, this town was a place from which to escape.

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Goodness knew most of her schoolmates had felt that way. But to Avery, Riverbend, nestled in its guardian mountains, was a safe haven from the rest of the world. She'd known she wanted to grow old here even before she'd realized she wanted to be a doctor. The people were friendly and quick to lend a hand. And the Robinson roots were deep here—five generations deep. She came from farmers and entrepreneurs, all devoted to this small mountain town. She was proud to carry on the family legacy.

She drove past the old Craftsman-style homes set close to the road and, in recent years, converted into businesses that mostly served hikers and nature lovers. A bait-and-tackle store, an outfitters shop, a rafting company.

Her clinic was just past the last of these. The sign by the street, lit from both directions, swung in the breeze. *Riverbend Medical Clinic*. The hours and phone numbers were listed, including an emergency number. Those calls had her desperate for another doctor. Sure, she had help: Katie, her nurse, and Sharise, her nurse practitioner. But Sharise was a single mother of two, so the responsibility of off-hour care fell on Avery.

She slowed and pulled in to the gravel parking lot, formerly the house's front yard. Her apartment upstairs was as dark as the porch. When she left the light on, someone inevitably showed up at midnight with a hangnail, thinking it was an all-night clinic despite the posted hours.

Her headlights swept across the clinic. It was one of the larger homes on the street, but the mountain beyond it dwarfed the brick structure. She shut off the Jeep's engine, then grabbed the gifts and leftover brownies, which Lisa had condensed down to one Over-the-Hill gift bag (compliments of Cooper). Avery looked forward to indulging in another brownie—it was her

birthday, after all. She'd enjoy it as she resumed her Jane Austen literary marathon—she was currently halfway through *Emma*.

As she stepped from the vehicle, her gaze flickered up to her darkened apartment where her cat, Boots, was almost certainly nesting in the living room window, awaiting her return. The night smelled of wood fires and gardenias. Avery took in the flowers Lisa and Katie had planted in the spring, but it was too dark to appreciate their beauty.

She'd added a private entry in the back but headed instead toward the clinic door, the most direct route. She took the porch steps and was withdrawing her key from her purse when her foot connected with something solid.

The shadowed lump gave a low, male moan.

## *Two*

“Hello?” Avery leaned over the man and gave him a gentle shake. “Sir?”

When he didn’t respond, she stepped over him, unlocked the door, and turned on the porch light. She was back at his side in seconds. Was he drunk?

He lay curled on his side, head propped on a backpack. He wore hiking shorts and a gray tee. Dark-blond hair fell in waves over his face, most of which was covered by an overgrown beard and mustache. All of the above—plus the earthy smell emanating from him—pegged him as a thru-hiker. She estimated him to be in his upper thirties, though the facial hair made it hard to ascertain his age.

No obvious injuries. His face was flushed but he wasn’t sweating. She touched his forehead. Midgrade fever.

The man stirred. His eyes squinted open, glazed but fixed

on her, a startling pop of cornflower blue against his bronzed skin.

“Sir, do you have an injury?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Sick.”

“All right. Well, let’s get you inside where I can examine you. Do you think you can stand?”

With what appeared to be Herculean effort, he pushed to a sitting position.

“That’s it.” Avery grabbed his upper arm—and what an arm it was. Sculpted and hard beneath her palm. It took three tugs to get him to his feet and then she saw why; he topped her by at least six inches. At five feet seven she wasn’t exactly petite.

He wavered on his feet.

“Steady there.” She gave him a moment to get his bearings, then opened the door. “Are you all right to walk? I’m Dr. Robinson, by the way, and I’ll be seeing to your care tonight.”

“My pack . . .” His voice held a ragged edge.

“It’ll be fine here on the porch for now. Let’s get you settled in a room.” She led him on a slow walk toward exam room one. “Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“Fever. Fatigue. Sore throat.”

“Any tick or mosquito bites?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Rash?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Have you been around anyone who’s sick?”

“Few days ago at a shelter. Guy was coughing a lot.”

Maybe a nasty virus, but she’d save the diagnosis until she’d properly examined him. “When did all this come on?”

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“This morning.”

They were almost halfway to the room. She got the feeling he wasn't used to requiring help and didn't like feeling needy, so she changed the subject. “Where are you staying while you're in town?”

“I—I don't know.”

Because he was confused? Or because he hadn't made plans yet? She assisted him through the exam room doorway. “You don't know?”

“Just got here.”

“Where did you spend last night?”

“Laurel Knob.”

She slid him a sidelong look. “That's almost fifteen miles away, and I didn't see a car in the lot.”

He said nothing as he dropped onto the bed, sagged down, and closed his eyes. His breaths were labored, and he shook with chills.

Avery took his blood pressure. Laurel Knob was north of town, which meant he'd climbed over two thousand feet of rugged terrain before descending into the valley on a humid day that reached into the midnineties. Challenging even for a healthy adult.

His blood pressure was on the low side, and his heart rate was high, from dehydration, exertion, or both. She clipped the oximeter on his finger and waited for a reading. Normal.

She finished the exam, asking questions when they arose. By the time she checked his lungs, he was hardly responding to her questions.

“Mr.—sir, can you wake up for me?”

His lashes fluttered open and his sleepy gaze fixed on her.

“You never told me your name.”

He wet his lips. “Wes Garrett.”

“Okay, Wes. Well, you might have a pretty good upper-respiratory infection going on. But the more worrisome issue is that you’re dehydrated. I’m going to call over to Mission Hospital and have them send an ambulance. You’ll need an—”

“No.”

“I understand your reluctance, but your medical needs are beyond the scope of the clinic. You need an IV, perhaps some diagnostic tests, and overnight care.”

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That wasn’t going to happen. Wes shook his head, the motion making it pound. “Can’t.”

Probably just a little virus. Granted it had literally knocked him to his knees today—more than once if he was honest. And he couldn’t begin to explain the relief he’d felt upon reaching the clinic. After the hot trek over the mountain, the rest felt divine, and the cool concrete porch was as welcoming as a luxury mattress.

“You’re severely dehydrated, Wes. You need IV fluids.”

His gaze locked on the doctor’s face. Ivory skin, smattering of freckles across her nose. Delicate brows arched over green eyes that would’ve stolen the show if not for that mane of brown hair.

She didn’t look much like a doctor in her white sleeveless top. Didn’t smell like one either; he drew in a fragrance that hinted of sunshine and coconuts. Then he realized she must be smelling him too.

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Time to go. He pushed up to a sit, the movement taking ridiculous effort. He blinked against his throbbing headache and pushed off the table.

The doctor placed her hands on his shoulders, holding him in place. “Whoa, whoa, where are you going? Did you hear what I said? You’re dehydrated—and you need an X-ray of those lungs and possibly other diagnostic tests to rule out something more serious.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll drink some water and rest a couple days.” As he got to his feet the room spun. His vision went dark around the edges, coming down to ragged pinpoints of light.

*Come on, Garrett. Fight it back.*

She put both hands on his arms and easily pushed him back down to the table. “What’s your problem with the hospital?”

He waited for the spinning to stop, then locked his eyes on hers. “No insurance.”

“They’ll treat you there anyway. It’s a terrific hospital. They’ll take good care of you.”

But they’d still bill him, and he had no way of paying for it. He didn’t take on debt if he could help it; it was a matter of honor. He licked his lips. So thirsty. “Don’t think so. Can you recommend a place nearby with a shower and bed?”

“Mr. . . . Wes. I highly recommend you rethink your plans. You really do need fluids and—”

He pushed to a stand, the wave of dizziness not taking him by surprise this time. “I appreciate the diagnosis, Doc. We can settle up and I’ll be out of your hair.”

He started toward the door, his legs wobbling as if he were on stilts. His head spun and his heart thrashed against his rib cage. He powered through, exiting the room. He had exactly

\$127 in his bag. Probably shouldn't have bothered with the clinic because that would likely cost everything he had, and he still had to pay for a—

“Wait. Wait.” The doctor stepped in front of him. “Do you have friends or family in town?”

“No.” He braced a hand against the wall.

She pursed her lips. “Fine. You can stay here. I'll set up an IV. I don't usually do that, but I'll make an exception this time.”

“Not necessary. I'll be fine.”

She narrowed her eyes on him, her full lips going tight at the corners. “Actually, you won't be. You're feverish but not sweating. You have a rapid pulse and you're light-headed. And then there's that headache you haven't mentioned. All signs your body's in desperate need of fluids, Wes, and you need them now. If you try walking to the nearest motel—which, by the way, is over a mile away—you'll pass out on the side of the road, and when someone finds you in the morning, they'll be calling that ambulance for you.”

“I don't have—”

“Insurance, I know. We'll work something out.” She grabbed his elbow. “This way. I have a hospital bed in room four where you'll be comfortable.”

He was too weak to fight. And he hated to admit it, but she was probably right about passing out. Even now the room was spinning, and putting one foot in front of the other was a challenge. He followed her down the hall, his hiking boots feeling as if they were weighted with sand.

An overnight stay in a medical clinic that obviously wasn't staffed for nighttime emergencies—this would cost a fortune

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he wouldn't be able to pay back anytime soon. Visions of his childhood swam in his head. The creditor messages, the eviction notices, the middle-of-the-night departures his dad tried to sell as a grand adventure.

He pushed away the memories and focused on walking. He entered the room and spotted the bed. Almost there. Just a few more steps and he could finally sink into oblivion.