

Praise for Denise Hunter

“Hunter’s latest is a healing and empowering journey of love. Told in Hunter’s classic style, *The Summer of You and Me* will stay with readers long after the end.”

—Rachel Hauck, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Yummy romance with a dash of mystery, this friends-to-lovers novel, *The Summer of You and Me*, is wonderful! Hunter’s deft hand mixes grief with new beginnings to make a delicious read that has Hallmark movie written all over it. Highly recommend!”

—Colleen Coble, *USA TODAY* and
Publishers Weekly bestselling author

“Poignant and powerful, *The Summer of You and Me* is an exquisite ‘out-of-the-box’ romance that will rack your mind and ratchet your pulse! The amazing Denise Hunter has done it again with a truly riveting read that’s short on sleep but long on hope.”

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

“This story pulled at my heartstrings from the first chapter right through to the last. I longed for Maggie and Josh to find their happily-ever-after, despite the emotional roller coaster they were on. Denise Hunter has written a beautiful story filled with the complexities that come with loving others, especially members of our own families.”

—Robin Lee Hatcher, Christy Award-winning author of
Wishing for Mistletoe and *To Capture a Mountain Man*

“Denise Hunter made me cry again. Wow—what a breathtaking, heart-tugging story! *The Summer of You and Me* has so many great surprises, twists, and turns that my head is reeling and I could not stop reading. You will not be sorry you read this book.”

—Hannah Alexander, author of *A Woman Worth Knowing* and *One Strong Man*

“*Love, Unscripted* has it all—the funniest meet-cute ever, unique characters, and a charming beach town setting. If you love sweet romance with a lot of heart, this one has ‘Hallmark movie’ written all over it. Highly recommended!”

—Colleen Coble, *USA TODAY* and
Publishers Weekly bestselling author

“Hunter (*Bookshop by the Sea*) opens this heartwarming romance with Queens, N.Y., western writer Sadie Goodwin learning that her publisher wants her to switch genres to romance . . . Hunter’s charismatic and complex characters effortlessly propel the story. Readers won’t want to put this down.”

—*Publishers Weekly* for *A Novel Proposal*

“A heartwarming tale written by an undisputed queen of the genre, *A Novel Proposal* is a love letter to readers, to writers, and, above all, to romance. As Sadie and Sam were forced out of their comfort zones, I sank deeper and deeper into my reading happy place. This cozy, clever, captivating love story is the perfect beach read and an absolute must for fans of happily ever afters. Denise Hunter charmed my socks right off with this one!”

—Bethany Turner, author of *Plot Twist* and *The Do-Over*

“A tragic accident gives a divorced couple a second chance at love in the warmhearted third installment of Hunter’s Riverbend Romance series (after *Mulberry Hollow*) . . . Readers looking for an uplifting Christian romance will appreciate how Laurel and Gavin’s faith helps dispel their deep-rooted fears so they can find a way to love again. Inspirational fans will find this hard to resist.”

—*Publishers Weekly* for *Harvest Moon*

“Denise Hunter has a way of bringing depth and an aching beauty into her stories, and *Harvest Moon* is no different. *Harvest Moon* is a beautiful tale of second chances, self-sacrifice, and renewed romance that addresses hard topics such as child death and dissolved marriages. In a beautiful turn of events, Hunter brings unexpected healing out of a devastating

situation, subtly reminding the reader that God can create beauty out of the most painful of circumstances and love from the most broken stories.”

—Pepper Basham, author of *The Heart of the Mountains* and *Authentically, Izzy*

“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!”

—Courtney Walsh, *New York Times* bestselling author, for *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* for *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.”

—Melissa Ferguson, author of *Meet Me in the Margins*

“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!”

—Jenny Hale, *USA TODAY* bestselling author

“*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.”

—Nancy Naigle, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *Christmas Angels*

“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

“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
Cross My Heart, for *On Magnolia Lane*

“*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

“*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 Fifth Avenue Story Society*

“*Barefoot Summer* is a satisfying tale of hope, healing, and a love that’s meant to be.”

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

*The
Summer
of You
and Me*

Also by Denise Hunter

RIVERBEND ROMANCES

Riverbend Gap
Mulberry Hollow
Harvest Moon
Wildflower Falls

BLUEBELL INN ROMANCES

Lake Season
Carolina Breeze
Autumn Skies

BLUE RIDGE ROMANCES

Blue Ridge Sunrise
Honeysuckle Dreams
On Magnolia Lane

SUMMER HARBOR NOVELS

Falling Like Snowflakes
The Goodbye Bride
Just a Kiss

CHAPEL SPRINGS ROMANCES

Barefoot Summer
A December Bride (novella)
Dancing with Fireflies
The Wishing Season
Married 'til Monday

BIG SKY ROMANCES

A Cowboy's Touch
The Accidental Bride
The Trouble with Cowboys

NANTUCKET LOVE STORIES

Surrender Bay
The Convenient Groom
Seaside Letters
Driftwood Lane

STAND-ALONE NOVELS

Sweetwater Gap
Sweetbriar Cottage
Summer by the Tides
Bookshop by the Sea
A Novel Proposal
Love, Unscripted
Before We Were Us

NOVELLAS INCLUDED IN

This Time Around, Smitten,
Secretly Smitten, and
Smitten Book Club

*The
Summer
of You
and Me*

**DENISE
HUNTER**



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Summer of You and Me

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Chapter 1

If Maggie Reynolds could just make it past August 7, she would finally be able to breathe again. But nearly two months of bittersweet memories stood between now and then like an emotional minefield. She hoped returning to Seabrook, North Carolina, for the summer wasn't a colossal mistake. Too late now.

At least she had her four-year-old in tow to distract her from all of the above.

As if on cue Zoey tugged Maggie's hand. "That one next, Mommy."

The canopied carnival ride spun in a slow circle, its young riders seated in sporty cars. "That looks fun, but we only have enough tickets for one of us. I guess you'll just have to watch me ride."

"Mommy." Zoey rolled her eyes. "I should ride and you can watch. I can do it by myself. I'm a big girl now."

"That's right, I keep forgetting."

Hand in hand they headed for the short line, pressing through the crush. Evenings on the beach boardwalk were the thing of legends in Seabrook, a sleepy seaside town poised between the more popular Outer Banks and Myrtle Beach. Here the stilt houses lining the beach passed from previous generations and were revered for the memories they held rather than each square foot of beach frontage.

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But come summer, the island, separated from the mainland by a bridge, would be overrun with sunseekers and golf carts. Each morning the tourists took advantage of the generous ocean treasures—numerous shells, driftwood, even shark teeth—that washed ashore at high tide. The ocean currents favored the stretch of beach along Seabrook's coast.

And each night the popular boardwalk would come alive with the sounds of blaring music, squeals of glee, calling carnies, and the mechanical whir of spinning rides.

Maggie absorbed the happy sounds, though the accompanying memories provoked a sense of melancholy: holding hands for the first time as they navigated the game alley, the two of them strolling the boardwalk, completely lost in each other, eating cotton candy from each other's sticky fingers.

The cloying scent of funnel cakes wafted by on a breeze, turning her stomach. She and Zoey had indulged in the treat just before boarding the swing ride. Zoey's young stomach seemed just fine—Maggie's not so much. At thirty-five she was no longer an impervious teenager.

Parents stood outside the barricades, waving and capturing photos of their excited children. Beyond the ride the town's iconic Ferris wheel lifted slowly overhead, its spokes sparkling with rainbow lights. Riders ascended high into the night sky, taking in the aerial view of the carnival, the boardwalk, and the beach beyond. At this hour the sea would be black and brooding, its white surf crashing the shoreline, rhythmic and relentless.

Maggie had wanted to share the view with Zoey, but her daughter had taken one glimpse of the soaring wheel and shaken her head.

As they settled in line, Zoey curled her small hands around the barrier's top rail, watching riders go around under the twinkling

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lights. Her hair, the same chocolate brown as Maggie's, was woven into two braids that hung over her shoulders. By the end of summer she'd have the kind of natural highlights Maggie paid good money for.

"This one's my favorite, Mommy," Zoey called over the cacophony.

Favorite was her new favorite word. "I thought the carousel was your favorite." They'd ridden it twice, Zoey choosing the white pony wreathed in pink roses both times.

"It was. But this will be my new favorite."

"Oh, I see. I like your optimism."

Wide brown eyes met Maggie's. "What's optimism?"

Her daughter was a little sponge. "Optimism means having hope about how things will turn out. Like . . . I'm very optimistic this will be a wonderful summer." She smiled through the lie. Tried to believe it, for Zoey's sake if not for her own. She was ready to move on with her life. Desperate to do so.

Zoey's brows furrowed. "I'm very optimistic . . . I'll get to stay up late tonight."

Maggie laughed. "Good guess since it's already past your bedtime." Tomorrow they'd get back on a regular schedule. They'd left Fayetteville only yesterday and were just now settled into her in-laws' beautiful beach cottage. Brad and Becky had left last week for their long-awaited, extended trip to Europe.

When they'd offered Maggie their place for the whole summer, she turned them down. Wasn't sure she was ready to return to Seabrook. Then she'd given it some thought. Maybe it would be good for her. Good for Zoey. It would soon be five years, after all. Time to say good-bye.

Maggie's phone vibrated in her pocket and she checked the screen.

Save me!

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A photo accompanied Erin's text. Her best friend and sister-in-law stood alone in the gathering, looking adorable in a little black dress. She'd styled her sassy blonde bob in beach waves that complemented her pixie face. Erin wasn't a fan of large crowds or small talk.

That's what you get when you marry a pastor. 😊

Another text appeared. *You're no help!*

Chin up. You can tell me all about it tomorrow.

"Almost my turn, Mommy!"

"It sure is." Maggie pocketed her phone as the ride crawled to a stop and a teenage girl helped the children disembark. Moments later the line inched forward and Maggie handed over the ticket.

"That one!" Zoey pointed to an old-fashioned red sports car.

"I'll bet it's the fastest one."

"Mommy." The face she made as she clambered into the car was a preview of teenaged Zoey. "They all go the same speed."

"Are you sure?" Maggie buckled the belt. "Yours looks so much faster."

Zoey rolled her eyes.

Her daughter was growing up too fast. Too smart for her own good. "I'll be right over there."

"Okay."

Maggie exited the area and moved outside the stanchions. She took her phone from her shorts pocket and snapped a couple of pictures before Zoey noticed and treated her to a cheesy smile.

A few minutes later the ride began its slow, circular journey. "Have fun!"

Zoey waved, smiling as the wind ruffled her flutter sleeves. Her daughter would enjoy the ride, but she wasn't one to squeal or scream. She was so poised for her young age. So grown-up. A fun summer away from the daily routines back home would be good for her. She

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could use some time with her cousins and Uncle Josh, who could make her belly-laugh like no one else.

Maggie lifted the phone and stepped back to capture the entire ride. Camera in place, she waited for Zoey to glance over, but her daughter was busy working the car's steering wheel. When the ride circled back around, Zoey glanced up and flashed a smile.

But a passerby blocked the shot. Maggie's gaze homed in on the screen. On the man.

A tsunami slammed into her heart.

She gaped at his face even as he exited the frame. *It couldn't be.* She lowered the phone and searched the crowd. There he was, disappearing into the fray.

She charged that way, her attention pinned to the spot where she'd last seen him. *There.* Just a car's length away, striding in the other direction. She followed, her body surging with adrenaline, her eyes wide, afraid to blink. She laser focused on the white ball cap, bobbing in the sea of people.

She crashed into somebody, glanced down as a young boy caught his balance. "Sorry, honey." Breathless words scraped from her throat, barely audible.

She glanced around, frantically seeking. In that brief moment she'd lost sight of him. Where was he? *Where was he?* She scrambled toward the spot where she'd last seen him, the juncture where the walkway split in three directions.

She turned in circles. No sign of him. The white hat was nowhere to be seen. Her breath hitched. Her heart shriveled. She had to return to Zoey before the ride ended.

Still she searched, growing dizzy with the motion, the spinning rides, the blaring music. With the soul-crushing realization that he was gone. The unbelievable realization of who she'd just seen.

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Ethan.

Impossible. She gave her head a shake. Her mind was playing tricks on her again. It couldn't be Ethan. It absolutely couldn't be her high school sweetheart, the only man she'd ever loved, the man she'd married and conceived a child with.

Because he was killed five years ago at his military post in Pakistan.

Chapter 2

Crew members, please prepare for mooring.” With the ease born from years on the river, Josh Reynolds maneuvered the *Carolina Dream* into its berth. Minutes later the sixty-five-foot riverboat crawled into place, and Josh turned on his headset. “All right, folks, we’re now safe to disembark. We hope you’ve enjoyed the beautiful Seabrook sunset. Thank you for choosing Island Tours.”

As the passengers filed out, he exited the pilothouse, descended the stairs, and stepped onto the dock to see them off. “Have a wonderful night, y’all . . . Thank you for touring with us . . . Hope to see you next time.”

“Bye, Cap’n Josh!”

“Bye, Caleb. Nice job steering the vessel. Come back when you’re ready to be my first mate.”

“Hey now!” Josh’s mate, Darius, complained with flair. “That’s not cool.”

The boy snickered and gave a final wave as he trailed his parents down the dock.

Big D’s chuckle rumbled in his barrel chest. “I love kids, man.” A college football injury had stolen all hopes of a pro career as a line-man, and eventually Big D decided to pursue his captain’s license.

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He'd been Josh's first mate for ten months, accruing the necessary days at sea.

Josh nodded good-bye to an older couple. "When are you and Mila gonna have a few of your own?"

"Oh, I'm working on it, don't you worry." He winked.

When the passengers finished disembarking, the crew got busy, prepping the boat for the morning tour. It seemed a popcorn fight had ensued on the top deck. And one of the toilets was stopped up. Josh handled that one and by the time he washed up, the vessel was clean and ready to be put to bed.

"Coming to Boone's?" Conner asked. The twenty-year-old worked the snack bar and was new to the crew this summer. His surfer-boy looks and youthful energy made Josh feel every one of his thirty-three years.

"Addison and Big D are going," he added when Josh paused.

"Yeah, maybe for a while." He had yet to see Maggie and Zoey, who'd arrived in town yesterday. Part of him was stalling.

"We don't wanna keep you up past your bedtime, old-timer," Conner teased as they joined Big D and Addison on the dock.

"That's *Captain* to you, buddy," Josh said with a grin.

"You coming with?" Addison asked Josh.

"Sure thing. Lead the way."

"All right," Big D said. "That's what I'm talking about. We can catch the end of the Braves game."

"How exciting," Addison deadpanned.

Conner edged in beside her. "Don't worry. I'll keep you company." He'd been flirting with her since day one. They'd make a cute couple with their matching blond locks and wide-eyed innocence. But Josh hoped it wouldn't mess up his crew when things went awry—as they were apt to at their young age.

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Conversation flowed among the group as they headed across the marina parking lot and caught the sidewalk. The tavern was only a short walk away and the June evening was balmy. The sun, which had adorned the sky in vibrant pinks, now slipped beneath the horizon, absconding with its brilliant show. The street was lined with towering palm trees, the medians blooming with pink azaleas.

As they walked, Josh's thoughts wandered to Maggie. She'd taken Zoey to the carnival tonight—had texted a picture of his niece earlier. But they were probably home by now, Zoey curled up with Bunny, the stuffie he'd gifted her at the hospital the night she was born.

It seemed so long ago. Maggie's pregnancy had been disrupted by waves of grief that came and went at will, each one shattering Josh's heart. He tried to be there for her—his whole family had. God knew she couldn't count on her own mom, and it was what Ethan would've wanted.

She'd been six months along when she asked Josh to serve as her birthing partner. Perhaps as Ethan's brother he was the next best thing. Maybe saying yes had been ill-advised, but after everything she'd been through, he could hardly turn her down.

Then Zoey was born, a red, wrinkled, squalling bundle that was somehow the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He felt like so much more than just her uncle. He'd already filled that role two times over, after all. It was the birthing experience, he told himself.

But it was more than that.

He'd carried a torch for Maggie since the day Erin brought her home her freshman year of high school. His thirteen-year-old self had walked through the back door and there she was, sitting at the island with Erin, eating grapes.

She was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen, with doe-brown eyes and a wide, contagious smile. She was tall and long-legged with swimmer's

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shoulders. She had sun-kissed skin and lush pink lips. And her laughter was like a song he never wanted to end. He'd fallen in an instant, head over heels.

Later he grew to admire less superficial things: her unrelenting loyalty, indomitable spirit, and dry sense of humor. Erin had brought her around a lot, and Josh made a real nuisance of himself, as teenage boys tend to do when they're smitten. He did his best to hide his feelings even as he dreamed of the day she'd see him in a different light.

But the two years between them might as well have been the Grand Canyon. He shouldn't have been surprised when she fell for Ethan instead. But he sure was heartbroken.

Big D's boisterous laughter diverted his thoughts. But seconds later Josh was once again thinking about Maggie and all the years he'd been on the fringes of her life. These past five years their shared grief had pulled them closer than ever. But her unrelenting love for Ethan held him back.

He hadn't gotten up the courage to tell her she was the sun his heart orbited. He'd tried so hard to change that. To root her from his heart like a pernicious weed. No man chose to be in love with his brother's wife. It was a torturous, guilt-inducing quagmire he wouldn't wish on his worst enemy.

He was scum. A lowlife. The bottom of the barrel.

But he'd loved her first. Also, hadn't he tried everything over the years? Avoiding her, focusing on her flaws, dating other women and lots of them. Shoot, he'd *married* another woman—he really thought he could make it work. But his stubborn love for Maggie had ruined all his relationships, including his marriage, because none of them were *her*. Hiding his feelings felt like a boulder on his chest that only grew heavier with each passing year.

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But soon he would change all that. First of all, Maggie was back in Seabrook for the summer to say good-bye to Ethan, to move on. In August they would mark five years without him. Together the family would spread his ashes on the water.

Second, Maggie was officially ready to date again. On his recent visit to Fayetteville, she'd asked Josh for help in that arena. The thought of lining up dates for her hit him like a wrecking ball.

No way.

Never happening.

Instead he would finally put his heart on the line. Tell Maggie how he felt about her. In his dreams she drew him into her arms and kissed him. In his nightmares she recoiled in horror.

Telling her was a huge risk, but the status quo was killing him. He'd finally reached a breaking point, and so he'd tell her the truth. Either she'd be open to exploring a relationship with him . . . or he'd lose her forever.

If the latter happened, he was putting some distance between them. She might live two hours away, but now that she was braving Seabrook again, she'd come around more often. She'd bring Zoey for holidays and birthdays and summer vacations. And if she turned him down, there was no way he was putting his tattered heart through those visits. He'd already set a plan in motion—just in case. He didn't see how he'd ever get over her otherwise.

When they reached the building's entrance, Josh's phone vibrated with a call. Maggie's picture flashed on the screen—the one he'd snapped a few years ago at the beach. Her hair was still damp, the natural curls coming out to play. The sun lightened her eyes to creamy caramel, and a few freckles had popped out on her nose.

He hung back as the others entered. "I'll be right in, you guys."

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He tapped the Accept button as he crossed the dinky porch, and carnival sounds carried through the phone. “Hey, Mags. You there?”

“Can you come over here?”

He tensed at the strain in her voice. “What’s wrong? Are you okay? Zoey?”

“We’re fine. I just— You have to come.”

“What is it?”

“You’re gonna think I’m crazy. I-I saw someone a few minutes ago. He looked just like—e-t-h-a-n. I lost him in the crowd and I need you to come help me search for him.”

His heart gave a sharp crack. “Maggie . . .” In the months following Ethan’s death, she’d regularly seen Ethan at the grocery store, the park, the mall. She’d seen a therapist for a while.

“I know it sounds crazy, but it’s not like those other times. I saw his face. I saw the way he walked. Please just come and help me, Josh. *Please.*”

“Of course, honey. I’m on my way.”

Chapter 3

Maggie had never been so glad to see anyone. Just the sight of Josh striding through the crowd lifted a weight from her shoulders. An Island Tours tee hugged his athletic frame and a pair of khaki shorts completed his outfit. The wind ruffled his wavy dark hair as he made a beeline toward her.

She met him by the arcade door, Zoey in tow, and grabbed him in a heartfelt hug. “He looked just like him,” she said into his ear. *“Just like him.”*

“Where’d you last see him?”

“Heading up the main walkway toward the boardwalk. I lost him where it splits off. We’ve already been around the whole place. He just disappeared.”

He gave her a squeeze before he pulled back and tugged one of Zoey’s braids. “How’s my girl? Having fun at the carnival?”

“I rode the carousel and the spinny ride and the red-car ride—that was my favorite. And I ate a funnel cake with Mommy and it made her tummy hurt after the spinny ride.”

“Is that so.”

“It’s past my bedtime and we’re out of tickets so we can’t ride any more rides. I don’t wanna ride the big wheel, though, ’cause it goes too high. Did you find your friend?”

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Josh sent Maggie a questioning glance. "I told her we were looking for someone you know."

His gaze toggled back to Zoey. "Not yet, Cupcake. We'll keep searching, though, all right?" He took her hand and they started down the walkway.

"He's wearing a white ball cap and he's tall." Maggie gave him a pointed stare. "I didn't imagine him, Josh."

He squeezed her hand. "Okay, honey. Let's keep searching. Two sets of eyes are better than one."

They scanned the area, staying close as they navigated the crowd. It took almost an hour to cover the two blocks of walkways. They searched every ride, every souvenir store. They checked Tully's Pizza, Scoops, and the Seascare Arcade.

Now they nearly reached the end of the boardwalk fronting the carnival, and Ethan's look-alike was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm tired," Zoey whined. It was way past her bedtime and she'd been a trouper.

Josh scooped her up. "We're almost done, sweetheart."

Zoey's arms noodled around his neck as she sagged against his shoulder.

The crowd was thin on the boardwalk, and Maggie could easily see the man wasn't up ahead. Her stomach filled with lead even as her steps slowed. "He must've left." She glanced down at Zoey, whose eyes were already closed. "I should get her home and to bed."

"I'll come over so we can talk."

"All right."

MAGGIE Poured two glasses of lemonade in the kitchen while Josh put Zoey to bed in the room Brad and Becky had fixed up for her.

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They'd purchased the cottage two years ago, and now that Zoey was old enough, she occasionally spent the night. Maggie was so lonely when she was gone, but it was important that Zoey had time with her grandparents. They loved her so much and she was the only piece of Ethan they had left.

Maggie returned the pitcher to the stainless-steel refrigerator. The home, an original ranch, was built on stilts and offered free (at least for her) beach views and sunrises. Her in-laws had spent nearly a year renovating the place, and Maggie loved the cheerful décor they'd chosen. Lots of white, accented with coastal colors: blue subway tiles, aqua throw pillows, sea-green rugs. The overall effect was calming and happy.

Maggie could use a little of both right now.

As she moved into the living room, the floor creaked on the other side of the house. Zoey had been asleep before they made it to the car. Her eyelids hadn't so much as fluttered as Josh carried her in.

Josh. It had been sweet of him to rush right over when she called. But that was Josh. She'd always been able to count on him. And after tonight he probably thought she was crazy. Maybe she was. A few years ago her therapist, Miss Allison, had assured her that seeing a lost loved one in a crowd wasn't unusual.

But August 7 would mark five years since Ethan's passing. Surely she hadn't conjured up his twin after all this time. She'd come such a long way from that pathetic puddle on her kitchen floor. She was stronger now. She'd come here to spend the summer, to spread her husband's ashes, to get on with her life—not to resurrect the past.

But she had to make sense of this. She had to believe she hadn't simply imagined Ethan's face. She'd gotten a good, if quick, glimpse

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of the man. She reviewed that moment in her mind for the dozenth time, and once again her memory presented Ethan's look-alike. Maybe a younger version of him, now that she thought about it.

Josh entered the room and sank beside her on the sofa. "She's out like a light."

"She was tuckered. It's been a long day."

He took a sip of lemonade and settled against the sofa back, his eyes trained on her.

She shifted under his steady appraisal. The funnel cake she'd eaten earlier sat in her stomach like an anchor, and her nerves were shot from an emotional roller coaster she hadn't purchased tickets for.

With that long, quiet perusal Josh was no doubt seeing much deeper than the surface. She glowered at him. "I wasn't imagining it."

"I didn't say you were."

"He looked just like Ethan."

"I believe you."

"Do you? Because the way you're staring at me right now says otherwise."

"I'm just concerned about you. I don't like seeing you so shaken."

"Well, how am I supposed to feel when I spy my dead husband and then he completely disappears?" *Again.* Tears sprang up and she didn't want to cry. Tears felt helpless. She wanted to be mad. Mad felt like control and darn it, she wanted some control.

He faced her, setting one arm across the sofa back. His hand dropped onto her shoulder. "Let's talk about this. Tell me about when you first saw him."

More of the anger faded as she fell into his denim-blue eyes. Josh wasn't her enemy. He was the furthest thing from that. "Zoey was on the kiddie-car ride and I was trying to take a picture of her. Just as

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she glanced up, he walked into the frame. I did a double take. It was Ethan. His high cheekbones, his deep-set eyes, his chiseled jawline. He was thinner, maybe . . . more like how he was built when he was younger before he filled in some. And maybe younger-looking in the face too, but it happened so fast.”

“They say everyone has a twin. Maybe you just saw Ethan’s?”

“Right here in Seabrook? Where he grew up? What are the chances of that?”

Josh was quiet for a beat. “Not very good, I guess. He had a hat on, you said?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t see his hair. But his face . . .” She turned her eyes to Josh as a tear slipped down her cheek. “It was *Ethan*. I wasn’t imagining it. I don’t believe in ghosts, and I can’t explain it, but it was Ethan.” After a moment she ripped her gaze away and raked her hands through her hair, squeezing until her scalp stung. She was entertaining a crazy thought. “I know that’s not possible.”

“Hey.” He thumbed away the tear. “I know this is unsettling, but you’re gonna be all right. We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“How? He’s gone and we have no clue where he went.”

“You saw him at the carnival—maybe he’ll come back. We can search tomorrow night and the next and the next if you—” His brow furrowed. “Wait. You said you spotted him when you were taking photos of Zoey. Is it possible you caught him in a picture?”

She couldn’t remember if she’d taken that shot. She’d been so rattled. She reached for her phone. Josh leaned close as she opened the photo app and tapped on the last picture she’d taken.

She gasped. There he was. *Ethan*.

It was a profile view and a woman partially blocked him. But Maggie’s phone was set for Live photos, so she opened the feature

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and dragged her thumb across the bottom of the screen until the woman passed and Ethan's twin turned toward the camera. For the second time tonight the image stole her breath. Set off a jackhammer in her chest.

Her gaze shot to Josh, who stared at the screen as if he'd just seen a ghost.



A shiver passed through Josh. He grabbed the phone and pulled it closer. He could hardly believe his eyes. The photo was a little blurry. But it *was* Ethan. There were his bright blue eyes, set deep beneath the slashes of dark brows. His aristocratic nose, high cheekbones, square jaw.

"You weren't kidding. He's a dead ringer." Appropriate choice of words since his brother was, in fact, *dead*. And dead men didn't go walking around the town carnival. Josh peered at the photo. "He's thinner than Ethan."

"People can lose weight."

Not dead people. He didn't have the heart—or even the conviction—to say it aloud. Because they'd never actually seen his destroyed body. And suddenly that little detail opened up a cavern of doubt. Josh homed in on the man in the picture, permitting the impossible thought to emerge from the shadows of his brain.

Still. There had to be some other explanation.

Maggie gave her head a shake. "I know it can't be true. He's gone. It's not possible he's still alive."

"There has to be a rational explanation. Maybe he's a long-lost cousin or something."

Her attention returned to the man on the screen. "He seems

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younger. Younger than he looked even at thirty-two. But he'd be thirty-seven now. This guy can't be that old."

"I agree." But Maggie was right—if they'd seen the guy in Wichita or Tampa or Houston, maybe they could write it off as a fluke.

But he was *here* in Seabrook.

For a while they studied the photo, noting every similarity. Zoomed in until his face was hazy, trying to find a hint to his identity.

After a few minutes Maggie sagged against the couch. "I know it can't be Ethan. But I need answers. I can't live with not knowing."

"Me either. We'll go back tomorrow night and look again."

"What are the chances he'd return to the carnival?"

"Probably small, but it's all we've got. We can show his picture around. Maybe someone will recognize him."

"Good idea." She took the phone and woke it up. Ethan's twin stared back at them. "We're going to Erin's tomorrow to swim and hang out. What should I say?"

His family had been through so much. It would be cruel to get their hopes up when they had no answers. Cruel enough that it was happening to Maggie and him. Because it was impossible to extinguish that tiny possibility. That impossible glimmer of hope. "Why don't we keep this between us for now—until we have some answers."

She nodded slowly. "No sense upsetting everyone." Maggie returned her attention to the photo for a long quiet minute. The phone trembled in her hands. She turned tear-filled eyes up at him. "It can't be him, right?"

It was hard to reconcile the facts. Tonight she'd seen Ethan's double. And yet almost five years ago, a uniformed officer and a chaplain had delivered news of his death. Both of these were true.

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If Josh was reeling, he could only imagine how she was feeling. Maggie, who'd clawed her way back from the pit of grief to single-handedly raise her daughter. He took the phone from her hands, set it aside, and opened his arms to her. "Come here."

She came eagerly, settling against his chest, clutching his shirt in her fist. He palmed the back of her head, relishing the weight of her against him. The slight rise and fall of her shoulders. The sweet scent of her shampoo. He could hold her like this forever. Two hours ago he'd hoped to do just that. But everything had changed now.

Even so, he'd give anything if the impossible could be true. If his brother had somehow come back from the dead, he'd find it in his heart to let Maggie go once again.

"Thank you for coming tonight," she said softly. "For not thinking I'm crazy."

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Anytime, honey. It'll be all right. I don't have any answers for you, but there's one person who does, and we'll just have to find him."