

DENISE HUNTER

“I adored this story! Five giant stars!”

—Jenny Hale, *USA TODAY* bestselling author

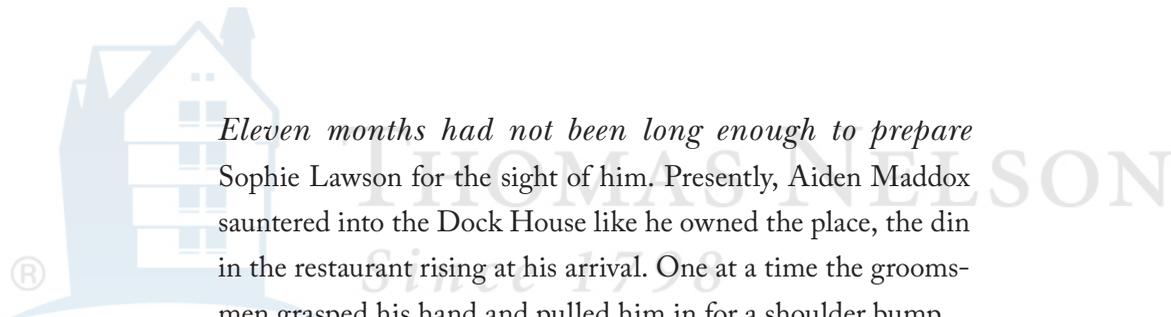
Bookshop *by the* Sea

BOOKS



chapter

one



Eleven months had not been long enough to prepare Sophie Lawson for the sight of him. Presently, Aiden Maddox sauntered into the Dock House like he owned the place, the din in the restaurant rising at his arrival. One at a time the groomsmen grasped his hand and pulled him in for a shoulder bump.

Seven minutes late.

Aiden swept Sophie's sister into a hug, giving her a peck on the cheek. His masculine frame dwarfed Jenna's slight build. The bride-to-be accepted his affection with apparent warmth that tweaked a thread of betrayal in Sophie's frayed heart.

Since she hadn't seen him in seven years—and since he was otherwise occupied—she allowed herself a quick assessment. He'd dressed up a pair of jeans with a blue sports coat that she knew, even from across the room, matched his eyes perfectly. At the moment he was talking to Grant, his best friend and Jenna's

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fiancé, smiling that same crooked smile that used to set her pulse thrumming. Aiden tossed his head back, laughing with abandon.

He looked much the same, just a little less boy and a little more man. His shoulders were broader, and he sported a five o'clock shadow. He still had those sensual lips, the top one curving like a heart, dipping low in the middle. But she didn't have to stalk him on social media to know what he looked like now when they knew so many of the same—

His eyes locked on hers.

Sophie's fingers tightened on the chair she stood behind. Her quick peek had turned into a prolonged stare.

She jerked her gaze away, pushed in the chair, and sought escape. Open French doors led onto the deck where the party would soon dine. The May breeze skittered over her skin as she slipped outside. Twilight's rosy hue lit the landscape, the marina with all its boats, and the shimmering harbor. Water rippled against the pilings, and somewhere nearby hardware pinged on a sailboat mast.

Sophie straightened the name cards she'd placed earlier on the long rectangular table. She had put herself to the right of the bride, Grant to the left, and Aiden just beyond him, a safe three chairs from her own. Her father would be on Sophie's other side, but that couldn't be helped. She had to keep him away from her twin brother, Seth, and their maternal grandmother.

Sophie glanced at her watch. Their dad was now ten minutes late. She sent him a text. It was her job to run interference tonight, which included overseeing her dad's movements and keeping Grant's grandfather from the booze.

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She ignored the erratic thumping of her heart—which had little to do with her assignments—and instead focused on positive things. The flickering votives, the white twinkle lights, the jazz music flowing through the speakers, and the savory scents of grilled steak and fresh garlic.

In the eleven months they'd been engaged, Jenna and Grant had gone back and forth a dozen times on the menu, requiring Sophie to call the restaurant as many times. But all that was behind them now. The stage was perfectly set for a beautiful rehearsal dinner.

As she reached for a votive, the hair on her arms lifted. The oxygen was suddenly too thick to breathe. She didn't have to turn around—Aiden had followed her outside.

"Hello, Sophie." The sound of her name on his lips made something twist hard and tight inside. Anger, that's what it was.

She stared into eyes that gazed at her with fondness. Fondness. As though he had any right to look at her that way. At least he wasn't presuming to hug her as he had the others. Surely he knew she wouldn't welcome an embrace.

"Aiden." She crossed her arms. "I see you made it."

"Were you counting down the minutes?"

"Somebody has to keep things on schedule. Your seat is there, beside Grant. Dinner will be served soon." She turned to go.

"Wait, Sophie. I haven't had a chance to tell you . . . I'm sorry about your mom. She was a wonderful lady. Closest thing I ever had to a mother."

His words triggered that soft spot she'd always had for the motherless boy.

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Do not feel sorry for him.

“Thank you.”

“You were good to her. And she was so proud of you.”

“Yes, well . . .” Sophie shuffled her feet. Toyed with the skirt of her sundress.

“Your dad must be devastated.”

She blinked at him. Her dad was the last person who had a right to be devastated. Hadn’t Aiden heard? Why had Grant never mentioned it?

Aiden looked back into the restaurant. “Hard to believe little Jenna’s getting married. Seems like yesterday she was begging us to drive her to the movies to meet some boy.”

“Well, she’s twenty-two now, and she’s found her perfect match. Grant will take good care of her.” If Aiden noticed the bite behind her words he ignored it.

“They’re good together.” Aiden shoved his hands into his pockets. “And Seth graduated from Appalachian State, I hear.”

“With his masters. He just got hired on as project manager at a consulting firm.” She glanced around for an escape, but the entire bridal party was still inside.

“And you, Sophie? What are you up to?”

She really didn’t want to talk to him about her dreams but decided to offer the bare minimum for civility’s sake. “I’m moving to Piper’s Cove. Going to open a bookshop.”

The corner of his mouth ticked up. “Wow, that’s great. A bookshop, huh?”

She just smiled in response. Politeness dictated that she ask

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about his life, his business. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. "I should go in and—"

"You look wonderful, by the way." His gaze grew intense. "You always have, but I think you're even more beautiful now."

She steeled herself against his charm. It didn't mean anything. Words were easy. And who did he think he was, coming here, saying things like that to her?

Think of Jenna. Keep it cordial.

"You look well too," she squeezed out.

His eyes twinkled in that familiar way, those silver flecks dancing. "Did that hurt much?"

"Only a little."

He chuckled.

She checked her watch. They couldn't wait any longer for their dad. "I should go and round everyone up. We're running late."

"I thought this was the Fosters' shindig—parents of the groom and all."

Grant's parents had paid for the meal—for the entire wedding actually, since the Lawsons' bank account was in poor shape. But the details had been left to Sophie, and in the wake of her mother's death, she'd been happy for other things to focus on.

"I'm just helping out."

Granny May appeared at their side, her small frame erect behind a walker adorned with an old-fashioned bicycle horn. Tonight her thinning white hair was coiffed within an inch of its life, and her Kelly-green blouse set off her peachy skin tone.

"Hello, Granny." Sophie stooped down to hug her maternal

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grandmother, a bouquet of Cinnabar assaulting her nostrils. “You look beautiful tonight.”

“I look like an old, shriveled-up prune—what can you expect at seventy-six? But you look lovely, dear.”

Granny turned a scowl on Aiden. “I see you found the back door quick enough.”

Aiden blinked. “Um, good to see you, Granny May.”

“That’s Mrs. Alexander to you.”

Sophie cleared her throat and addressed her grandmother. “Have you had a chance to meet Edward Drury yet—Grant’s grandfather?”

“Is he the one at the bar, taking down the whiskey shots?”

Sophie winced. Not already. “I should introduce the two of you later. He’s really nice, and Grant thinks the two of you might hit it off.”

“His cornbread’s not baked in the middle if he thinks I need a man in my life at this point.” She found Aiden over the rim of her glasses. “Don’t you have a plane to jump out of or something?”

“Granny . . .” Sophie took the woman’s elbow. “Why don’t you help me round everyone up? We’re running behind schedule.”

As Sophie strolled back inside the restaurant, she felt Aiden’s eyes on her back. Her face flushed with heat. Her legs felt like wobbly stilts. She thought she’d been prepared for this.

She would survive this weekend. She just had to get through dinner and the rehearsal tonight, then the wedding and reception tomorrow. Two days. Then she could count on him to leave—because leaving was what Aiden Maddox did best.

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Aiden watched Sophie's retreat, his gaze lingering on her tall, slender form. She still had that regal look about her—square shoulders, elegant ballerina neck, grace in motion. Her sleek and shiny brown hair wasn't waist-length anymore, though it flowed well past her shoulders. It would no doubt still feel soft as butter if he ran his fingers through it. Not that she'd give him the chance.

He looked away. Okay, so he was still attracted to her. Not a surprise, really. But he hadn't expected her to be standoffish. Not that he thought they'd be best of friends or anything, but he expected to have congenial, perhaps even wistful, conversations. He sure hadn't realized her hard feelings had survived all these years.

Not that he didn't have some remorse about leaving—he couldn't regret a business that had become so successful. But he had grieved the loss of their relationship.

Within moments of Sophie's departure, the party began trickling outside. A celebratory vibe stirred in the air as they took their seats. Sophie was too far away for conversation. He couldn't even see her from here—but that had probably been the plan.

Once everyone was seated Mr. Foster welcomed them, then offered a poignant blessing. Afterward they tucked into their salads while Aiden made conversation with the bridesmaid and groomsman seated across from him. All the while thoughts of Sophie lingered in the back of his mind.

Soon the waitstaff swooped away empty salad plates,

replacing them with entrées. He barely noticed the savory smell of his steak as Sophie's laughter carried to his ears. He'd always loved her laugh, unrestrained and melodic. Infectious. He looked her way, wondering what had provoked it, but Grant still blocked his view.

Aiden stabbed a piece of steak. What had gotten into him tonight? Ever since his eyes fastened on hers across the restaurant, an ache clawed in his chest. He'd thought about her a lot over the years, of course. She was his first love. He sometimes missed the quiet conversations on her porch swing, missed her generous heart and dedication to whatever she set her mind to. And he missed teasing her about all of it. He'd never known anyone so darn dependable, much less a teenager. But then, she'd had to be those things.

As if on cue her dad stepped out onto the deck. Although Craig Lawson's impeccable suit and neatly combed auburn hair indicated he cared about his daughter's big event, his late arrival suggested otherwise.

"Daddy, you're here." Beaming, Jenna stood and embraced her father.

Beside Aiden, Seth stiffened, scowling at his dad before taking a drink. What was this? Had there been a fallout between father and son?

Sophie gave her dad a hug and invited him to take a seat beside her. But her posture was stiff, her smile tight. Had something happened in the aftermath of Rose's death? Sometimes great loss brought a family closer together, and other times it tore them apart.

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Grant must know what had gone awry with the Lawsons. But when he'd started dating Jenna a year and a half ago, Aiden had given him strict orders to keep all news of Sophie and her family to himself. He'd loved her so much. He didn't want to keep looking back and missing her. Best to just keep moving forward—or so he told himself.

"It seems like the weather's supposed to hold out through tomorrow," one of the groomsmen said.

Aiden was glad for the distraction. "They're calling for sunny skies on your big day, Grant."

"It's not supposed to start raining until Sunday."

"That'll give everyone plenty of time to get back home," Seth said.

A tropical storm was headed this way. It had caused some stress over the past week as they watched it develop in the Caribbean waters and swing northward.

Except for Aiden and one of Grant's college buddies, everyone had driven from Raleigh and would return after the reception Saturday night. Aiden had a late flight back to Charleston.

Empty plates were removed one at a time as conversation carried on at the table. The sun sank quietly in the sky, the twinkle lights glimmering off the harbor.

Mr. Foster rose, holding his glass aloft. "I'd like to toast my son and his soon-to-be wife." He went on to say kind things about the happy couple, throwing in a couple jokes along the way. Then with watery eyes he wound things down. "Grant, I know you'll treat your bride with all the love and kindness she deserves. Jenna . . . welcome to the family, sweetheart."

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“Hear, hear!”

As the group quieted once again, Jenna’s dad stood and cleared his throat. “I don’t know if I can even talk after that.”

The group chuckled, but Seth stiffened beside him again. Aiden didn’t think he was imagining the mounting tension in the room.

“Hard to believe my baby girl’s about to tie the knot.” Craig turned to address the bride-to-be. “Jenna, you bring joy to everyone who knows you. And it seems you’ve found a young man who makes you happy. I wish you many years of joy together.”

“Hear, hear!”

Amidst the din Seth raised his glass. “To dear old Dad . . . may these two lovebirds end up a lot better off than—”

Sophie shot to her feet. “To Jenna and Grant . . . the happy couple we’re celebrating tonight. Um, I know the words of King Solomon sum up the way my sister feels. ‘I found him whom my soul loveth.’ I’m so happy for you both. To a long and happy union.”

There was another round of clinking glasses as servers set out slices of cheesecake, and the group went back to their respective conversations.

Aiden cast a glance down the table. How many crises would Sophie end up averting before this weekend was over?

chapter

two

Might as well get this over with.

Sophie kissed Pippa's furry brown head and set her down in the master bedroom of the Fosters' beach cottage. While the rescue Yorkie was nothing but a sweetheart for Sophie, she was distrustful of strangers, something Sophie assumed was left over from her early days. Jenna had begged for the dog for her eighteenth birthday, but the responsibilities of dog ownership had soon fallen upon Sophie. Jenna hadn't seemed to mind when Pippa chose Sophie as her master.

She glanced around the room, making sure there was nothing for Pippa to get into. Thanks to the Fosters' generosity, the beach house would be Sophie's home for three weeks while she spruced up the building that would house Bookshop by the Sea. Then she'd move into the space above the shop.

Her belongings were already unpacked and put away. Well,

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what she had with her. Most of her things were in storage. She was glad to be in Piper's Cove, after arranging all the pieces from Raleigh, making multiple trips back and forth. Finally, she was ready to pursue her dream.

But she couldn't think about that right now. First, the rehearsal. The mental checklist for the next two days was long and emotionally exhausting, and she found herself eager to tick all the boxes.

Pippa stared at her with sad brown eyes, her fluffy black tail drooping. Sophie tossed the dog her favorite squeaky toy. "I know, honey, but it'll only be for a little while. Be a good girl. Play with Bunny."

Sophie closed the door behind her and made her way through the crowded living room, following a path that took her around the armchair where Aiden was chatting with Dana, one of the bridesmaids. Sophie slipped through the sliding glass door. Time to get this show on the road.

A warm, salty breeze drifted over the deserted beach. Tomorrow white chairs would be aligned in tidy rows, and a gazebo, draped with chiffon and dripping with wisteria, would stand center stage near the shoreline.

She had so many memories in this beach town, most of them good, before her mom fell ill and her dad bailed. They came here every summer, staying in rental homes. She and her siblings played at the shoreline all afternoon, turning browner by the day, while their parents watched from the beach under the shade of an umbrella. Evenings were for riding bikes along the boardwalk. Each night Sophie dropped into her bed with a book, sun-tired

and happy. That Jenna had decided to have her wedding here attested to the fond memories attached to this place.

Sophie joined Jenna at the deck railing, placing an arm around her sister's shoulder. "Everything all right, sweetie?"

Jenna turned to her, eyes shimmering with tears. "I can't believe I'm getting married tomorrow. Grant's everything I dreamed of, Soph."

Sophie's shoulders released the tension the tears had automatically induced. "I'm so happy for you. He's a good man."

"He really is." Jenna dabbed at her eyes. "And I'm already ruining my makeup."

Sophie produced a tissue. "You look beautiful. Grant's a lucky man, too, you know."

"Thanks. Is Dad keeping away from Seth?"

"Don't you worry about that. I'll handle any problems that arise, but I'm sure they'll both be on their best behavior." Though Seth's impromptu toast gave her cause to question that statement.

She squeezed Jenna's shoulders, noting the fading light. "We should get going before we lose daylight."

They quickly went over the order of ceremony.

"So after the parents are seated," Jenna said, "the harpist will strike up 'A Thousand Years,' and Dana and Erik will walk down the aisle, followed by—"

"Wait. I—I thought you wanted the groomsmen waiting up front with Grant and Pastor Dave. The bridesmaids were going to walk down the aisle alone."

"No, I told you, didn't I? We changed it a couple weeks ago.

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Dana and Sarah were worried about walking alone on the sand. They want strong arms to hang on to.”

Sophie imagined her arm curled around Aiden’s, tucked close into his side. Deep breaths. “Oh. Sure. Of course. Whatever you want, honey.” They talked through the remaining order, working out minor details.

“Okay,” Jenna said finally. “I think we’re all set.”

“I’ll go get the others.”

Fifteen minutes later Pastor Dave and Grant stood near the shoreline as twilight encroached. The wedding party gathered on the deck, watching the ushers pretend to seat the Fosters.

Sophie felt a twin twinge and searched the group for her brother. Sure enough, across the deck her dad had cornered Seth. Jaw knotted, her brother stared toward the water.

Daggonit, Dad. Now is not the time.

Sophie made her way over and touched her father’s arm. “Dad, we’ll need you over here with Jenna. It’ll be your turn soon.”

Seth gave her a grateful look as she led their dad to the steps where Jenna waited. Seth had been vocal about his disapproval of Dad’s participation in the ceremony, but this was Jenna’s day. He’d promised to behave, but if their dad kept trying to engage him, things could go sideways in a hurry.

Things could not go sideways.

“All right,” Sophie called over the chatter. “Here we go. Everyone get in order of the procession.”

Everyone shifted, moving into place. Sophie kicked off her

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sandals. For the wedding they'd wear little wisps of decorative lace, extending from their second toes to their ankles, but tonight they were barefooting it.

Aiden appeared at her side, offering his arm and a crooked smile. "I see you're still taking care of everyone."

Sophie bristled, remembering that last argument seven years ago. He'd been too immature to understand her family obligations.

"Well, I am the maid of honor after all."

"I didn't mean anything by—"

"Here we go, everyone." Sophie tapped the button on her phone, and the beginning strains of "A Thousand Years" flowed from the speaker.

The couples strolled down the aisle two by two. And then it was Sophie and Aiden's turn.

She reluctantly took his arm, trying to imagine that her left side was numb and that she didn't feel the warmth of his body or smell his subtle piney scent.

Aiden kept his gaze forward. "What I said before—I didn't mean it as an insult."

She kept a smile on her face. "Sounded like one."

"Listen . . . maybe we should start over."

"Like before you arrived or before you left?" What was wrong with her? She was supposed to be smoothing things over. Keeping the peace. He just raised her hackles. Their strife seemed discordant with the harmonic music and festive atmosphere.

He sighed. "Okay, maybe I should start with an apology then."

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“That’s not necessary. Let’s just get through this, Aiden.”

It had been her motto for the last seven years. Through Aiden’s abrupt departure, her father’s abandonment, and her mother’s long illness and death eight months ago.

But now her mom was gone, Seth was self-sustaining, and her sister was getting married. Sophie was finally, finally, on the verge of having her own life. Nothing was going to ruin it. Certainly not Aiden Maddox.

“All I meant was that you took care of your family when they needed you. You should be proud of that.”

“I don’t need your approval.”

He gave a wry chuckle. “What do you need from me, Sophie?”

“I don’t need anything from you.” This was taking forever. She glanced behind her, making sure Jenna and their dad were ready. “Can we speed this up a little?”

“Eager to be rid of me?”

She held her tongue. She’d been dreading this little reunion ever since Grant slid that engagement ring on Jenna’s finger. Even though Aiden moved to Charleston shortly after he graduated, he remained close to Grant.

But not to his girlfriend. No, he just dumped her like yesterday’s garbage.

Sophie shook the thought. For all of their forward progress it seemed they were on a treadmill. Her arm was far from numb. Rather, the springy hairs of his forearm tickled the soft flesh of her wrist. She curled her fingers into fists to avoid touching him unnecessarily. And his familiar smell was about to drive her

crazy. It took her right back to high school prom, talks on her porch, making out in his Chevy truck.

“Look, Sophie . . .” His smoky voice made gooseflesh rise on her arms. “I’m really sorry about how I left. You didn’t deserve that, but I did try to call that once—”

“Now is not the time, Aiden.”

Yes, there’d been one phone call three months after he’d left. One voice mail, begging her to return his call. He hadn’t said it outright, but she’d gotten the feeling maybe he felt like he’d made a mistake. But Sophie had her hands full with caring for her family. And she wasn’t eager to pursue a long-distance relationship with someone who’d left her behind so easily.

He glanced her way. “I wasn’t ready for the kind of—”

“Not now.”

“—relationship we had. I was eighteen, and I had things I wanted to do. I didn’t know who I was, and I was too young to—”

“Aiden. Can we talk about this later?”

“When?”

“I don’t know.” The guys were going out after the rehearsal, and the girls were holing up at the beach house. “After the reception tomorrow night.”

“I have to leave early, my flight.”

“During the reception then, but not until after the toast.” Her maid-of-honor duties would keep her busy until then.

“All right. Save me a dance. We’ll talk then.”

They’d finally reached the front. “Fine.”

Sophie gladly let go of Aiden’s arm and took her spot just to the left of center. Only when she realized she’d committed to

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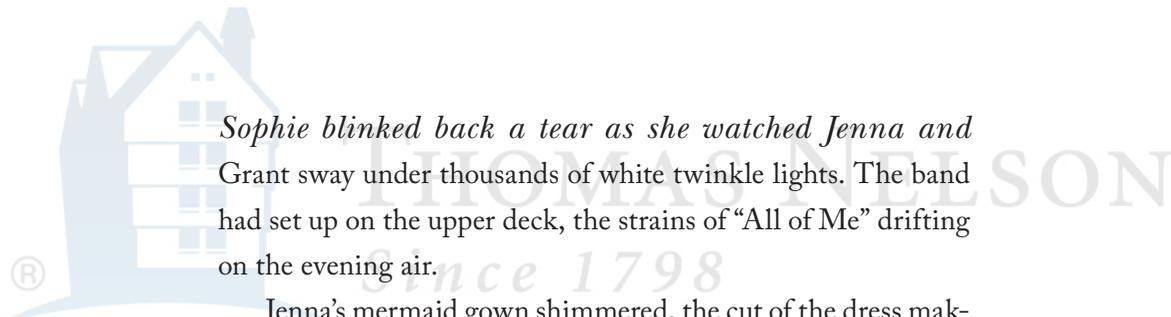
dancing with the man who'd broken her heart did her practiced
smile slip.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

chapter

three



Sophie blinked back a tear as she watched Jenna and Grant sway under thousands of white twinkle lights. The band had set up on the upper deck, the strains of “All of Me” drifting on the evening air.

Jenna’s mermaid gown shimmered, the cut of the dress making the most of her petite figure. Their mother’s diamond pendant glittered above her V-shaped neckline. Though the necklace had been given to Sophie, Jenna had begged to wear it as her “something old” and promised to take good care of it. Someday, Sophie wanted to wear the heirloom at her own wedding—but that day felt eons away.

Grant placed a kiss on his bride’s forehead. Sophie couldn’t believe her baby sister was married. Jenna had skated through her teenage dating years, breaking hearts along the way, but had never fallen head over heels.

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Then in college Grant had come along, and it had been love at first sight. Jenna, having never suffered a broken heart, was a firm believer in fairy tales. It worried Sophie a little, her expectations. But Grant really was one of the good ones—his taste in best friends aside—and Sophie believed he'd treat Jenna right.

Sophie was tempted to sink into a chair, but she was afraid she wouldn't be able to get back up. Having gotten little sleep last night, she was running on adrenaline. She'd made it through that long—thankfully silent—walk down the aisle with Aiden. Held back tears through the emotional ceremony. Smiled her way through the pictures, many of them putting her in close contact with Aiden. Chatted her way through the dinner and gotten through her toast—the ending of which she'd had to rewrite since she borrowed it last night.

She'd almost made it.

Sophie swept her gaze around the room, locating her dad near the railing with Sheila, his date. He was entitled to bring someone, but she wished he hadn't. The presence of the thirty-something brunette had done nothing to soothe Seth's bitterness.

Sophie spotted Grant's grandfather on the beach with other relatives. He swayed slightly as he sipped from a flask. Sophie sighed. Later she would ask him to dance and swipe the thing from him if she had to wrestle him to the ground. She couldn't allow him to ruin Jenna's day.

Granny May was seated on one of the benches, watching the bride and groom dance, a soft smile making her seem years younger.

Sophie caught sight of Aiden on the other side of the deck.

Dana's hand rested lightly on his bicep as he seemingly hung on to every word.

For the first time today Sophie allowed her gaze to linger on him. He looked like sin in that black tux. His hands were tucked in his pants pockets, the jacket lapels flaring apart to reveal the crisp white shirt and broad chest beneath it. The physicality of his job had kept him in excellent shape.

His dark-brown curls were artfully tousled tonight, fluttering in the breeze. In the shadows his deep-set eyes remained a mystery. His face was shaved smooth, highlighting his cheekbones and exposing the sharp cut of his jawline. There was a ticklish spot right under that jaw. She used to—

His gaze locked on to hers.

She couldn't look away. They'd always been connected this way. If he was nearby she knew exactly where he was. There'd been times she'd thought of him and somehow knew he was thinking of her right then too. It was the same feeling she had with Seth—the twin thing.

But Aiden wasn't her twin. Aiden wasn't her anything.

The crowd broke out in applause. The music had ended. She jerked her gaze from Aiden as the band started a popular line-dance tune. Time for the wedding party to earn its keep.

Erik appeared at her side, extending his hand and a charming grin. "Wanna dance?"

"Sure." Sophie took his hand and joined the growing throng on the makeshift dance floor. They did the energetic moves, side by side, exchanging laughter when he goofed up a move or hammed it up.

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Minutes later the band segued into another crowd-pleaser, and the dancing continued. From the middle of the pack Sophie kept an eye out for trouble. Seth was dancing beside one of the bridesmaids, seemingly having a good time. Their dad was at a table with Sheila, watching the fun from the sidelines. During the fourth song she lost sight of Grant's grandfather.

The song ended and the band struck up a slow tune.

Erik held out his hands. "Dance with me?"

She'd done her dancing duty, and she really should find Mr. Drury. But one glance at Erik's puppy dog eyes and she acquiesced.

Erik's hands settled at her waist as the bluesy ballad wove around them. Others had also coupled up, leaving the dance floor full.

"It was a nice wedding, wasn't it?" Erik said. "Grant seems really happy."

"He and Jenna are a good match. You were there when it happened, weren't you? When they met?"

"I was." Erik laughed, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Just like that, he was gone. He didn't get her number that night either, and he moped around until he finally found her on Facebook."

Sophie had heard the story before. She watched the newlyweds swaying under the lights, gazing at each other as if there were no one else around. "Jenna was the same. She called me the next day and told me she'd met the man she was going to marry. And here I thought she was being fanciful."

His eyes twinkled down at her. "Have you ever fallen for someone like that? Love at first sight or whatever?"

“Not—not that suddenly.”

“Me neither.”

But she was remembering the way Aiden had appeared out of nowhere her junior year of high school. She’d been trying to get a pack of jelly beans from the school vending machine, but it was stuck. He strode right up to her in that black leather jacket, tipped the machine, and freed her snack. Once he retrieved the package, he held it out, his eyes pinning her with a smoldering look she felt to the tips of her toes. Even then there was a connection. He flirted with her for weeks before he finally asked her out.

Across the deck Aiden and Dana turned in a slow circle. The woman was pressed against his chest, her head resting on his shoulder.

Sophie’s heart squeezed. He was only dancing with Dana out of obligation. Word was, he was dating someone back home. With Sophie’s sister dating—and now married to—Aiden’s best friend, she sometimes got wind of information she hadn’t asked for and didn’t want. Apparently Aiden was quite the heartbreaker these days.

Dana looked up at Aiden, saying something, and he smiled down at her.

Erik shifted them around, causing Sophie to lose sight of Aiden and Dana. “You can’t seem to stop staring at your ex.”

“What? No, I’m not—I’m keeping my eyes on everyone. Grandpa Edward and my dad and Seth . . . I’m making sure nothing gets out of hand.”

His eyes twinkled. “If you say so. You are a very diligent

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sister. Grant told me how you took care of your mom when she was ill. That's admirable."

"It was a labor of love. My mom was an amazing woman."

"I'm sure she was. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, Erik."

"Jenna said you got into Duke?"

Turning down that scholarship had been one of the most difficult things she'd ever done. She lifted her shoulder. "I don't need a college degree to get where I want to go."

"Ah, that's right. The bookshop. How'd that come about?"

"I've always been an avid reader, and I worked at a library in Raleigh. I love how books can transport you to another place. You get caught up in the characters' lives, and they become your friends. I guess I want to share my love of reading with others."

When she'd been caring for her mom, reading had been a necessary part of her mental health—and a pastime she shared with her mother. She spent many afternoons those last months reading all their favorites aloud to her mom. They spent hours planning out every detail of her bookshop all the way up until Mom's last days. But Sophie didn't want to think about that today, not on Jenna's happy day.

"I thought bookstores weren't doing too good these days, what with e-books and everything."

"Independent stores are actually experiencing growth right now. And there's not a bookshop around for fifty miles, so I'll have no competition."

The song ended, but the band moved into another slow ballad.

“What about you? Jenna said you have one more year of school. Business administration?”

“Business management. I plan to take over my dad’s restaurant when I graduate. The degree was his requirement.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

Aiden appeared at their side. “May I cut in?”

Before she could put him off, Erik stepped away. He hiked an amused brow at her. “To be continued.”

Aiden slid smoothly into Erik’s place, but that was the only thing that was the same about this dance. She was suddenly conscious of the warmth of his hands at her waist, of the taut stretch of muscles beneath her palms. Of the graze of his lips at her temple.

THOMAS NELSON

Ever since he’d spotted Sophie in Erik’s arms, Aiden had been counting the seconds before he could ditch Dana and take the man’s place. Aiden drew Sophie close until his arms stretched around her.

And yes, he was making a point of dancing closer to her than Erik had. It filled some primal need he couldn’t quite figure out. He couldn’t seem to help himself. That she didn’t resist his efforts made him a little heady.

He wanted to ask if she was interested in Erik, but he didn’t want to waste precious time talking about some other guy. Aiden needed to make things right with Sophie, if he could. That had

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been his solitary goal since last night when he'd realized she still held him in contempt.

"You've been avoiding me," he said softly into her ear.

"I've been attending to my duties."

It was more than that, and he couldn't blame her. "I really am sorry for how I left. You deserved better."

He waited for her response while their feet shuffled, while their thighs brushed. He grazed his palms across the low arch of her back, still remembering the curves he'd mapped out years ago.

"Forget it," she said finally. "Water under the bridge."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Sophie."

She stiffened.

He leaned back until their eyes met.

"I counted on you, Aiden. That was a big deal for me."

Guilt pricked him hard. Sophie'd had precious few people in her life she could lean on. She'd spilled all her secrets to him, and he'd thanked her by running off.

"I called you after I left."

"I remember."

"You never called me back. But even so I picked up my phone so many times, wanting to tell you things, wanting to know how your day was going."

"Why didn't you?"

He gazed into her solemn brown eyes, wanting to give her an answer that would somehow heal the wound. It was a question he'd asked himself a million times. But he never arrived at a reasonable explanation.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. It was the most honest answer he could give her.

But not the one she’d been hoping for apparently. Her lips pursed as she broke eye contact to stare over his shoulder.

“That’s God’s honest truth, Sophie. I loved you. And I left you. Both of those things are true.”

At the hurt and confusion in her eyes, he wished he could call back the words. He didn’t want to cause her more pain. “Maybe I’m just not cut out for all that stuff.” She’d been the first girl he’d broken up with, but heaven knew she hadn’t been the last.

As far as healthy relationships went, he hadn’t had much of an example. His mom left when he was so young he barely remembered her. And after the divorce his dad seemed to have no interest in finding another wife. Aiden wasn’t even sure he believed in happily ever after. At least, not for himself.

“Or maybe you just took the easy way out,” Sophie said.

Only leaving her hadn’t been easy at all. “I was young and stupid, what can I say?”

Probably not that, because his reply made Sophie bristle.

Ross Givens had offered him part ownership in Extreme Adventures in exchange for sweat equity. And for a guy with little money to his name and no college opportunity, it seemed like a dream come true.

It paid off too. Aiden was now doing quite well financially.

But you lost Sophie, his stubborn heart reminded him.

The song was winding down too quickly, the strains of the outro playing. Dig deep, Maddox. And fast. “I really am sorry I hurt you, Sophie.”

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She gave him a placid smile and a small nod that did nothing to alleviate his guilt.

The last note of the song played out, and a faster rhythm rose to take its place. Sophie drew back, her hands sliding away. “I should go check on some things.”

“Wait, we’re not finished.”

“I think we are.” She turned to go.

He caught her hand gently. “Come on. I have to leave soon, and I don’t want to go with things unsettled between us.”

“Things have been unsettled for years, and it hasn’t seemed to bother you until now. But fine. If you need to hear you’re forgiven . . . you’re forgiven. It was a long time ago, and we were both young and stupid. Let’s leave it at that. I hope you have a safe trip home.”

He winced. He knew he’d been stupid, but hearing that Sophie considered herself the same for falling for him was a punch to the gut.

By the time he thought of something to say, it was too late. Sophie was making a beeline across the deck toward Mr. Drury. She coaxed him onto the dance floor.

At least it wasn’t Erik. But that knowledge was small comfort in light of the obvious resentment Sophie still harbored against him.

chapter

four



The rest of the evening seemed to pass in fast-forward. Sophie danced with Mr. Drury, effectively confiscating his flask. But he was already wasted, and later he bumped into one of the bridesmaids, knocking her to the sand. Sophie smoothed things over and ushered Mr. Drury back to the dance floor before he could cause any more trouble.

From there she spotted her dad and Seth in a heated discussion down on the beach. She handed Mr. Drury over to his daughter, Grant's mother, and went to head off the conflict.

Her dad was as desperate for Seth's forgiveness as Seth was to avoid him, and Craig didn't know when to quit. Sophie coaxed Seth back to the party while Sheila distracted their dad.

In the middle of it all she received a scolding from Granny May. "Why in heaven's name were you dancing with that horrible boy?"

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“It was just a dance, Granny.”

“What you need is a nice young man—and it so happens my friend Dora has an eligible grandson who—”

“No thank you.” She gave Granny’s arm a gentle squeeze, then excused herself.

She had no delusions that that was the end of it, however.

All through the evening she’d been aware of Aiden’s presence, on the dance floor, mingling with the groomsmen, chatting with the newlyweds. She was having a drink with Erik when she caught Aiden’s eye across the deck. He lifted a hand as he descended the deck stairs, giving her a sad little smile.

Sophie waved good-bye and went back to her conversation, refusing to dwell on the fact that Aiden was leaving and she might never see him again. It was for the best. When Erik asked for her number, she gladly gave it to him. He was nice and fun and easy to talk to, and apparently she needed a distraction.

The party wound down over the next hour, and finally it was time to see the newlyweds off. They were traveling to the Bahamas, which had narrowly escaped damage from the storm now heading their way.

Family and close friends gathered at the limo to see the love-birds off. As Grant held the door, Sophie gave Jenna a long hug.

“I love you, honey.” The words didn’t do justice to all the emotions bubbling inside. “Have the most wonderful time.”

“Are you sure you don’t want help with the cleanup? Sheila and Granny May offered to stay.”

Sophie was too tired to deal with her father and Sheila or

Bookshop by the Sea

Granny's aggressive matchmaking. "I've got all the time in the world."

"If you're sure. Thank you for all you've done. You're the best sister a girl could ask for."

Sophie drew back and palmed Jenna's cheek. "Be happy."

"I'll make sure of it," Grant said.

Sophie gave him a final hug, and as they slid into the car she called, "Let me know when you get there."

The crowd cheered as the couple drove away, and Sophie blinked back happy tears as the taillights disappeared down Bayside Drive. Her baby sister was officially married.

More good-byes were said, and finally the last of the guests left. Sophie went back into the quiet house and released an anxious Pippa from the bedroom. The terrier bounced around, trembling with happiness to see her mama again.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Pippa whined pitifully and Sophie chuckled. "Well, it's over now anyway."

After changing into yoga pants and a T-shirt she took Pippa outside, lingering awhile since the poor darling had been cooped up.

Once she had Pippa settled inside again, Sophie began to set the place to rights, starting with the deck. A drizzle began as she was picking up the last of the trash. She'd take down the twinkle lights in the morning. According to the forecast it would rain for a while before the actual storm hit, so she'd have time to safeguard the house as well.

She thought of the big dead oak tree outside her bookshop

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and prayed it withstood the gale-force winds approaching. She couldn't afford—and didn't have time for—a damaged roof right now.

The caterers had cleared away the food and dishes, so there was only random trash in the house to deal with. When she was finished picking up, she carefully slid the furniture back into place.

It was almost midnight by the time Sophie fell into bed with a copy of *She Means Business*, trying to dredge up the excitement that had been building for months. Excitement about her new life and her new shop.

But the gloomy cloud that had been hanging over her the past few hours refused to budge. She tried to blame it on some kind of empty nest syndrome. Her family was gone and she was officially alone. But if she was honest, the sense of loss had begun before the crowd's departure, before her sister's departure even. It began the second Aiden Maddox raised his hand in good-bye.

Nonsense. He'd been out of her life for seven years now. They didn't even live in the same state.

And yet . . .

Sophie gave her head a shake as she pulled Pippa close, snuggling her baby. "Well, sweet girl. I guess it's just you and me now."



Aiden needed something to distract him from thoughts of Sophie. From the memory of her guarded eyes and evasive manner. At

least she'd returned his wave when he left instead of pretending she didn't see him.

He settled into the seat at the airport gate and pulled out his earbuds. He had only himself to blame. He'd lived with his decision to leave her, but somehow coming face-to-face with the pain he'd caused her made it all fresh again. He spent the drive to the airport pondering why he ever left her.

Yes, the opportunity at Extreme Adventures had been an excellent one, and nobody loved the thrill of an adrenaline rush as much as he. But he loved Sophie and knew she couldn't go to Charleston with him. He not only hurt her, he hurt himself. Even as busy as they were, getting the business off the ground, he was neck deep in heartache for months.

He was opening his favorite music app when a text came in from the airline. His stomach dropped as his eyes caught on the word canceled.

No.

He looked at the gate screen and saw the same word repeated there. A commotion began around him as fellow travelers realized their plans had been upended.

A line was already forming at the desk near the jet bridge. Aiden hopped on his phone and checked the radar. He knew he'd been cutting it close. But the storm was slow moving, hanging over Georgia for two days. Now it appeared to be moving faster, however.

Further investigation showed the Charleston airport had closed. He'd have to book another flight, no earlier than tomorrow—and that was if he was lucky. The timing would be

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tricky because once the Charleston airport was open, it would be only a matter of hours before the storm would close this airport.

Driving home was a last resort. Even without the storm, it was a five-hour drive. And with all the inlets and rivers, he could almost count on flooding. No, it would be better to take his chances with the airlines.

Tomorrow was Sunday; his business was closed anyway. The ESTA ceremony wasn't until Tuesday, and since he was up for the award, he had to be there. But he should be fine. He waited in line at the desk and tried to be patient while other travelers rearranged their plans.

When it was finally his turn he rebooked for the next evening. The storm would be out of Charleston and not yet here, in full force at least. Maybe it would even dissipate, as often happened as they moved north.

New schedule in hand, he hitched his backpack onto his shoulder and turned his thoughts to accommodations. With the approaching storm and canceled flights, hotels would be booked. The Fosters' beach house wasn't far away. Everyone would be long gone by now.

He'd have to get another rental car, but that wasn't a big deal. He checked his watch. Too late to bother the Fosters with a call, but they wouldn't mind his bunking there for the night. And he knew just where they kept the spare key.

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About the Author



Photo by Neal Bruns

Denise Hunter is the internationally published bestselling author of more than thirty books, three of which have been adapted into original Hallmark Channel movies. She has won the Holt Medallion Award, the Reader's Choice Award, the Carol Award, and the Foreword Book of the Year Award and is a RITA finalist. When Denise isn't orchestrating love lives on the written page, she enjoys traveling with her family, drinking good coffee, and playing drums. Denise makes her home in Indiana, where she and her husband are currently enjoying an empty nest.



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