

before
we
were
us

DENISE
HUNTER

BEFORE WE
WERE US



DENISE HUNTER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Before We Were Us

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CHAPTER 1

JONAH LANDRY ELECTED to stay busy on the day his entire future hung in the balance. That's why the axe was poised over his head when the death rattle of his sister's Jeep Gladiator reached his ears.

Finally.

He swung the axe down, slicing into an upright log, and left it there. Then he grabbed his Henley shirt and headed up the slope of the resort's wooded property. A carpet of pine needles padded his eager steps and a nattering squirrel cheered him on. He drew in a deep breath of crisp autumn air heavy with the smoky scent of last night's bonfire.

His long strides made quick work of the distance. He pulled his shirt into place just as Meg stepped from her truck.

Her shoulder-length auburn waves glinted in the sunlight, and her pale skin was flushed from the trip to Portsmouth in her air-conditioning-free vehicle. "You know we have a log splitter, right? Or were you just hoping Lauren would catch a glimpse of your six-pack and start drooling?"

"It's called *nervous energy*. Where is it?"

She gave him a blank stare. "Where is what?"

His heart might have stopped beating. It definitely seized in his chest for a long, panicked moment.

“Just kidding,” the little brat singsonged, smiling as if his whole future wasn’t on the line here.

He was just about to throttle her when she shoved a small cream-colored box at him. He grabbed it and withdrew a rich blue velvety box.

“You’re welcome. I had to park three blocks away and wait fifteen minutes while they—”

“Thank you.” The lid gave a quiet squawk as he opened it—and there it was, tucked into a soft blue nest. His irritation lifted like autumn fog off the lake.

Lauren had changed a lot in the six months since she’d come to work at Pinehaven Resort, but she still had a penchant for sparkly things. And the brilliant oval diamond dazzled.

Tonight he would take her out to eat at The Landing. Then they would go for a ride on the lake in the same boat where he’d professed his love for her a month ago. The memory of that moment sent a rush of heat through him. When she’d stared up at him, her heart in those beautiful eyes, he’d wondered if he’d died and gone to heaven. What had he ever done to deserve this beautiful, resilient woman?

The sound of Meg’s laughter pulled him from the sweet memory.

He scowled at the teasing sparkle in her eyes. “What?”

“You are such a goner.” She was still laughing.

He snapped the case closed, unable to work up any real irritation on today of all days. “Shut up.”

A few weeks ago he’d seen the ring in a display window in Portsmouth but knew a proposal was premature. Oh, he’d wanted to marry her. He’d known right away she was the one for him. Well, once he’d stopped hating her. But he hadn’t been sure Lauren was quite there yet.

Until two weeks ago when they’d sat in the gazebo at Bayview Park. Swaths of pink streaked the sky, a glowing stage for the sun’s final act of the day.

Her head rested on his shoulder and her hand lay on his chest. “I think I could stay here forever.”

It wasn’t often she was so open, so unguarded. He was careful not to overreact, though he couldn’t prevent the way his heart two-stepped in response. “In Pinehaven?”

She snuggled closer, burying her face in his chest, uncharacteristically shy. “In your arms.”

Jonah had called Garrett Jewelers the next day and purchased the ring.

“What are you wearing?”

His sister’s question snagged his attention. “I don’t know. Khakis and a button-down, I guess.”

Meg rolled her eyes, seeming more sixteen than twenty-one. “Wear the navy khakis with your camel oxfords and matching belt and the blue button-down—she likes the way it matches your eyes.”

“She does?”

“Don’t wear a blazer—she’ll be suspicious. You never wear a blazer.”

“You’re a little bossy.” Sometimes he forgot his sister was all grown up. Hard to believe this was the same freckle-faced little girl he used to help with algebra and chemistry.

“You made a reservation, right? The Landing fills up on Saturday nights.”

Give me a break. He spared her a look.

“What time should I bring the boat to the marina?”

“As soon as we leave for supper.” What would Lauren think when she saw their boat just steps from The Landing? Would she realize what was about to happen? How would that make her feel? Would she be excited? Nervous?

“You know what you’re gonna say, right?”

“I believe ‘Will you marry me?’ is traditional.”

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Meg sighed. “You’d better come up with more than that. This should be the most romantic moment of her life.”

A knot of worry tightened in the pit of his stomach. “No pressure there.”

“Just tell her how you feel. Is that so hard?”

He’d given this plenty of thought already. He had a few ideas swimming in his mind. But he didn’t want to memorize some speech. Didn’t want this to be scripted. It should come from the heart, in the moment. Hopefully his heart wouldn’t go blank.

And when he was finished she’d give him that wide smile, green eyes lit and happy and perhaps glazed with a sheen of tears . . . and she’d say yes.

A sudden thought made his thoughts slip gears. Made the ground drop from beneath him. She would say yes, wouldn’t she?

They hadn’t dated very long, but *he* was sure. That didn’t necessarily mean she was though. Maybe she needed more time. She hadn’t been raised in a warm home with a solid example of love and marriage. His hands shook as he pocketed the jewelry box, which missed the pocket entirely. He fumbled with it before it plunked to the ground.

Meg chuckled as she retrieved it. “Look at you. You’re a mess. Relax, it’s gonna be fine. She doesn’t suspect a thing.”

Hardly his biggest concern at this point. Was he rushing things? Why hadn’t he put more thought into this? What if his proposal scared her off for good? “Like, doesn’t expect it because tonight seems like an ordinary day, or doesn’t expect it because it’s months too soon for a lifetime commitment and she’s not even sure I’m the man she wants to make it with?”

Meg tilted her head, a smile curving her lips. “Aw, you’re cute when you’re insecure. I’m so telling Lauren about this once she has that ring on her finger—and she will have that ring on her finger.” Meg patted his arm, wrinkled her nose at the sweaty dampness, and withdrew her hand. “She’s gonna say yes, Bro. Would I set you up for failure?”

“There was that time in middle school . . .”

“Please. You could’ve done so much better than Maddy Benton.”

His sister had had uncanny insight even as a gangly teenager. And though she loved messing with him, she always had his best interest at heart. She and Lauren had grown close over the summer. If Lauren wasn’t ready for this, Meg would know.

“Stop worrying. Tonight’s gonna be perfect.” She moved to the bed of the truck. “But you can work off that nervous energy by helping me unload all this stuff.”

Jonah checked his watch, then grabbed a bag. Three hours and counting.



FROM her spot on the bay, Lauren Wentworth’s pet project was just a patch of weathered red peeking through the dense forest. The trees were just starting to turn, a sprinkle of gold and orange against the deep green pines. She had no doubt the New Hampshire fall would delight her.

She drew the oars through the water, pushing the boat toward the pier, where her dog, Graham, sat waiting. His yellow coat gleamed in the sunlight.

“Look, honey,” Beth Cabot said from the back of the boat. “It’s a loon.”

George lifted his old-school camera and snapped a photo. “He’s a little late heading to the Atlantic, isn’t he, Lauren?”

“The young ones sometimes linger longer than their parents.” She’d learned a lot about loons since her arrival in March. She’d learned a lot about many things.

She rowed closer to Graham and the boat dock belonging to Pinehaven Resort. The resort traffic had slowed since last week—Labor Day weekend. High season was officially over, and their guests would now consist mostly of older couples. Some of whom couldn’t get out on the

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water without assistance. Leaf peepers would soon flood the state, but peak season was still weeks away.

Lauren could finally turn her attention to the big barn on the property adjacent to the resort. The “buffer” property, Tom Landry had called it. Lauren had found the old relic by accident one day, back when she considered her position at the resort a mere stepping stone to her dream job back in Boston.

My, how things had changed. She gave the oars one final pull and the boat drew alongside the pier.

Graham stood, backend wagging, ears perked, brown eyes sparkling.

“Miss me, buddy?” Lauren grabbed the dock post and pulled them in, tied the rope around the cleat with some precision. She offered a hand to the couple who were in their upper seventies but still spry.

“Thank you, dear.” Back on land, Beth petted Graham, who soaked up the attention. “We so wanted to take a lap around the lake this year, but our shoulders just aren’t what they used to be.”

“I’m always happy to get out on the water. Let me know if you want another ride before you leave.”

A minute later as Lauren waved them off, she spotted Jonah heading down the sloped ground toward her. Her heart clutched at the sight of him. Even in an old T-shirt and jeans, he did it for her. His work around the property kept him fit and muscular, and the summer sun had darkened his skin to a deep bronze. The ball cap, worn low, called attention to his handsome facial features: light blue eyes, a slightly crooked nose, and lips that were perfection.

Those lips tipped as he approached. “You took the Cabots out on the lake?”

“Great day for a boat ride.”

He brushed her mouth in a quick kiss that made her anticipate their upcoming evening. Their gazes held for a beat. Yeah, a night with Jonah was just what the doctor ordered. Their summer schedules had been

hectic, and working for a family meant there was a lot of family time. She wasn't complaining. She loved each one of the Landrys. But time alone with Jonah?

As if reading her mind, he pulled her close and kissed her again, his lips taking their sweet time with hers.

"Mmmm," she murmured long seconds later. "Nice."

"Just nice?"

"Just perfect."

He gave her that sleepy-eyed look she'd come to love. "Ready to be wined and dined?"

"I can hardly wait. But a shower's definitely in order, and I think I'll lose the ponytail and resort polo."

"But you're so cute in resort wear." He kissed her nose.

Impatient for his attention, Graham nudged between them.

Jonah ruffled his fur. "Hey, bud. Yes, I see you. It's been all of thirty minutes. Meg just got back with the supplies. Did the Browns finally check out?"

"Just in time. Fran's cleaning it now. Should be done by three. I was just gonna head back to the barn and see how the hayloft looks with all the stuff gone." While she'd been working yesterday, he and Meg cleared out the space, which had been filled with decades of junk.

"If anything, it seems even bigger. Let's go." He grabbed her hand and they set off, Graham on their heels, across the property toward the path that led through the woods.

Birds chirped from the spiny branches of a hemlock tree, and the wind whispered through the leafy canopy. They'd spent their recent spare time clearing brush and weeds from around the barn's exterior, exposing the stone base. It would take a lot more work to transform the old building into the venue she saw in her imagination, but Lauren was eager to see her vision materialize.

She was excited for the future. It might look far different now at

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twenty-six than she'd once imagined, but it was somehow better and clearer than those wispy dreams that had carried her through college. The reminder that she might be running from her past pressed like a boulder on her chest.

But she pushed away the unsettling thought as their conversation turned to business matters. They made their way through the thick woods, their footfalls silenced by damp pine needles. Soon the path opened to the clearing, and the sun shone on the structure, highlighting the recently exposed side walls and rock base. Lauren couldn't help but smile.

"You gaze at this eyesore like it's the Holy Grail."

She jabbed him with an elbow. "She's not an eyesore. She's a diamond in the rough and she's gonna be beautiful. You just wait—every bride in the county will want to say her vows here."

He squeezed her hand. "I don't doubt it for a minute."

He slid open the creaky barn door, and as they passed through the doorway, the air immediately cooled. Lauren's nostrils filled with the musty scent of earth and time long past. Sunbeams flooded through filmy windows, and slivers of light cut through cracks in the vertical boards, dust motes dancing in their beams.

Now that the space was clear of debris, she could envision the final product even more clearly. They would maintain the barn's rustic integrity but add embellishments: twinkle lights, a chandelier, and a grand stone fireplace at the west end of the barn that would seem as if it had grown here.

"You have that look on your face again." His smile was full of affection. "Just a peek at the hayloft—we have reservations. And you have all winter to whip this place into shape." He grabbed the aluminum ladder that leaned against the wall adjacent to the loft. "Ladies first."

And up she went as he steadied the ladder. A moment later she caught her first glimpse of the open loft. It wasn't her first time up here, but

the junk had hidden the square window in the center of the back wall of the loft. It now shed a soft glow over the space. Some rags and a bottle of Windex sat on its ledge, but judging by the film of dirt on the panes, they hadn't been used yet.

She stepped onto the platform that didn't even squeak at her weight. "Oh, this is perfect. We'll be able to fit at least six extra tables up here. We'll need a railing built to code. And another chandelier to cozy it up. But the view is great, isn't it? They'll be able to see all the action from up here, and the photographer will have a wonderful vantage point."

Jonah cleared the ladder, then stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "I love your passion for this place. Have I mentioned that?" He pressed a kiss to the crook of her neck.

Smiling, she tilted her head to give him greater access. "You just love my passion, period."

"You're not wrong."

She closed her eyes and sank into the moment—something new to her. She still had to remind herself to stop and savor the moments. Not to be in such a rush to do more, climb higher, get ahead. Oh, she still wanted to do all those things.

But the tranquil moments were also nice. Very nice.

His lips had worked their way up her neck and jaw, and then he was turning her in his arms, his eyes hooded with want.

"You have that look on your face again," she said.

And then his lips were on hers. She never tired of his kisses. He somehow hit the mark between commanding and reverent with expert precision. His touch and taste were familiar by now, equally soothing and stirring—and she craved both with an addict's obsession.

His hands roved over her back as hers worked into his short brown hair, displacing his cap. She barely heard it thunk to the ground. Her hands followed the line of his shoulders and down to his arms. She loved his arms. Adored how secure she felt within their confines. Her heart

was so full. She didn't know love could feel this way. But now that she knew, she was greedy for more.

From below, Graham's impatient bark brought her back to planet Earth.

Jonah decelerated the kiss, reluctance in the slow steps of his withdrawal. In the way he set his forehead against hers as if not quite ready to let go of her. Their breaths came heavily, mingling together. "Reservations."

She took delight in the ragged edge of his voice. "I know." And now that her brain was starting to function again, she remembered she'd planned to wash her hair, blow-dry and curl it, the whole deal. Not to mention her nails. They were in terrible shape.

"I can't wait to have you all to myself tonight," he said.

"Me too—also the black-and-blue filet, if I'm honest."

He chuckled, pressed a kiss to her forehead before he drew away. "That's my girl."

He glanced back at the window. "I'm gonna clean that window before I head home to shower. Ran out of time yesterday."

"All right. I'll meet you in the lot a little before seven?"

"No way. I'm coming to your door like a proper gentleman."

"Have it your way," she said, secretly delighted. She gave him a peck on the lips and tossed him a smile before she stepped onto the ladder and began her descent. Her gaze took in the spaciousness of the barn from above. She would almost hate filling those cracks where the sunlight sneaked through. It would be such a beautiful place for a wedding. Perhaps someday, in the not-too-distant future, she and Jonah would—

Her weight-bearing foot slipped. She grasped the sides. Too late.

Gravity took her. Panic stole her breath. A startled cry ripped from her throat.

And then there was nothing.

CHAPTER 2

JONAH PACED THE length of the hospital hallway, the past thirty minutes replaying in his head like a horror film. He couldn't erase the terrible thud of Lauren's body hitting the floor. The clatter of the ladder's fall reverberated in his head. The sight of her unmoving body on the ground below him flashed in his mind on repeat. She'd looked as if she were—

Stop it. Stop. It. She's gonna be fine. She has to be.

His mind returned to his panicked 911 call. To the long, helpless minutes of waiting, when all he could do was call her name. Hold her hand. Let the steady pulse in her neck give him hope.

Graham whined mournfully, tail tucked, licking her other hand.

What had seemed like an hour later but was probably only minutes, the EMTs stabilized Lauren's neck with a brace. They put her on a board and carried her through the woods to the parking lot, where they loaded her into the ambulance. Jonah insisted on riding along, and since he'd gone to school with one of the EMTs, he'd gotten his way.

Upon arrival at the hospital they'd swept her through the ER and into a room for a CT scan. He wasn't allowed in.

At the end of the hall, Jonah pivoted, said his hundredth silent prayer, then glared at the closed door. How long could this take? It seemed like hours since the door had swung shut behind the gurney.

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and he checked the screen. Meg.

He hit the Accept button. "Hey. I don't know anything yet. They took her straight in for a CT."

"Is she awake?"

"Not when she went in." He ran his hand over his face. How could this be happening? Less than an hour ago she was smiling up at him with those big green eyes. Kissing him with those soft lips.

"She's gonna be fine."

"You don't know that." His throat was thick with emotion.

"She has to be."

That picture of her, sprawled lifeless, pale blonde hair fanned out on the floor, flickered in his thoughts again. He blinked against the sting in his eyes. "She fell from so high, Meg. Her head hit that old wood floor and—" He stopped talking before he lost it altogether. Swallowed against the knot in his throat.

"She's a strong woman. She's gonna wake up and she's gonna be fine. You'll see."

"I should've gone down first. I should've held the ladder." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Why didn't I hold the ladder?"

"Honey, it's not your fault. It was just an accident."

The words ricocheted off his heart. Why had he stayed behind to clean that stupid window?

"Take a breath, and for all that's holy, don't blame yourself. It was a fluke accident, and we'll all be sitting around next week relieved and grateful that she's fine."

Please, God. "Hope you're right."

"I am. You'll see." A beat of silence followed. "I got hold of Mom and Dad. They'll be there as soon as they can. Poor Graham is confused. He keeps going to the door and whining. I think I'll take him for a walk. But don't worry about anything; everything's under control here. Just take care of our girl."

"Thanks, Meg." His empty stomach churned. Sweat had broken out

on the back of his neck. "I'm gonna go now. I'll let you know as soon as I find out anything."

"All right. I'm praying hard."

JONAH paced. He took off his hat, ran his fingers through his hair, and put it back on. Glared at the closed door. Took off the hat again and slammed it to the floor. Paced more laps. Picked it back up again.

Finally the door opened. He rushed over as two orderlies wheeled her out on the gurney. She was still strapped to the board, still in a neck brace.

Her eyes were open!

"Lauren." Jonah fell in step with them. "Honey, I'm right here."

Head braced, her eyes tracked until they settled on him. She blinked them, and then they fluttered closed.

"She has a whopping headache," the older orderly said. "The bright lights aren't helping. Once we get her to the room, they'll get her something for the pain."

"Is she okay?"

"She's a little confused. We'll know more once the doctor examines her and we get the results of the CT."

"Everything's gonna be okay, Lauren."

If she heard him, she gave no indication. But the frown line across her brow indicated she was still conscious. That was good, right? Conscious was good.

The orderlies wheeled her into a room and transferred her on the backboard onto the bed. "A nurse will be in shortly."

Jonah moved to her side, took her hand. "You gave me a scare. How are you feeling? Do you need anything?"

She tried to open her eyes, squinted against the lights. Then she pulled her hand from his and put it over her eyes.

"I'll turn them off." He moved away, swiped at the switch, and the

fluorescents extinguished. The room was still plenty bright with the light flooding in from the hallway. He returned bedside. “Better?” When she lowered her hand he took it again, needing to feel her skin, warm and alive beneath his.

“What happened?” she croaked. “Why am I in the hospital?”

“You don’t remember? We were in the barn, checking out the hay-loft. You fell off the ladder. I’m sorry. I should’ve been holding it for you. You fell from pretty high up. An ambulance came and brought you to the hospital.”

She pulled her hand from his. Blinked up at him. “What barn?”

Before he could register the question, Carson McConnell swept into the room, wearing teal scrubs, a white lab coat, and a stethoscope slung around his neck. He was a friend from church and a pediatrician intern at the hospital. His brows pinched when he spotted Lauren. “Hey. One of the nurses told me you took a fall. What rotten luck.”

Lauren’s eyes swung his direction. “Hi.” Her hand trembled as she tried to smooth her hair.

Carson greeted Jonah and they shook hands. Then Carson approached the bed. “How are you feeling? Nasty headache, I’ll bet.”

The tips of her ears pinkened as she met Carson’s eyes, reminding Jonah of the crush she’d had on the man when she first arrived in town. “It’s pounding. I’m—I’m a little foggy.”

“No doubt. I’m just coming off my shift, but I’ll see if I can get you bumped up in line.”

Jonah moved closer to Lauren, took her hand in both of his. “We’d appreciate that. She just had a CT scan. She could use something for her headache.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Can I call anyone for you? Your dad and mom?” He glanced at Lauren. “Your family?”

The guy was already attractive. Did he have to be thoughtful too? Never mind that Lauren didn’t have any family to speak of. He’d call her

best friend Sydney later. “Thanks, but it’s taken care of.”

Carson gave Lauren his anchorman smile. “All right then. I can see you’re in good hands. Just wanted to stop by and check on you. I’ll see if I can get someone in here quickly.”

“Thank you.” Lauren’s lips lifted. “Very kind of you.”

“Least I can do for a friend. Let me know if I can do anything else,” Carson said to Jonah on his way out.

“I will. Thanks.”

Lauren watched him go, then closed her eyes.

“Hopefully they’ll be in soon to check you over.” Jonah recalled the way she’d smiled at Carson. Something seemed off. She didn’t seem her usual self. She wasn’t particularly demonstrative, but she’d hardly glanced at Jonah since she’d awakened, and her hand was lying as limp as a dead fish in his.

Her chest rose and fell slowly. Her finely arched brows were drawn together over eyes that moved behind closed lids. Her tangled lashes fanned out above pale cheeks.

Her eyes flashed open and her gaze darted wildly around the room before jerking to him. Her chest rose and fell with quick breaths.

“Hey . . .” He squeezed her hand. “It’s gonna be okay. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Confusion flickered in the depths of her eyes. “What happened? Where am I?”

CHAPTER 3

LAUREN COULDN'T THINK. Her head was full of cotton, and her pulse thrummed in her temples. Something was around her neck; she couldn't move her head. She didn't remember coming here. Didn't remember any of this!

What's happening to me?

"Hey, it's okay." Jonah squeezed her hand. "We're at Pinehaven Hospital. You took a fall—that's why you have a neck brace, just a precaution. You've had a CT scan and we're waiting for the doctor."

"I hit my head?" She removed her hand from his and raised it to the back of her head. Winced at the tender lump. Her stomach roiled. She lowered her hand and closed her eyes against the pain. She didn't want to see Jonah. Where was his mom? She'd rather have Tammy at her bedside. Would rather have anyone here, even Carson, though she must be a fright.

Good grief, how vain could she be? And why wouldn't someone come in and give her something for this awful headache?

"That's it, close your eyes, rest a bit."

At least Jonah was being nice for a change. Sad that she had to get whacked upside the head to wring a smidgen of kindness from him. She opened her eyes. He looked different. He'd cut off all that long dark hair and shaved his scraggly beard. When had he done that?

“Who’s at the resort?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, Meg’s taking care of everything. Mom and Dad will be here soon. Graham’s worried about you.”

Gram. Did he have a grandmother she hadn’t met? And why would the woman be worried about Lauren? “Who?”

“Graham.”

Gra-ham. Still didn’t ring a bell. “No idea who you’re talking about.” All this thinking was making her head throb. Why couldn’t he just leave her alone?

“Lauren . . . you don’t remember your dog?”

“I don’t *have* a dog.”

His lips slackened. His brow furrowed and he took her hand again.

Her hand.

She homed in on her fingers. The calluses weren’t concerning, though she didn’t remember them. She was a hard worker and was employed as a manager at a rustic resort.

It was her nails. She always, *always*, kept her nails manicured and painted. Currently they were bare of the polish she’d last used—Ballet Pink, if memory served—and her cuticles were an abomination.

What was going on? Why weren’t her nails painted? Why did Jonah think she had a dog, and why in heaven’s name did he keep touching her? Her breath felt stuffed in her lungs. They, too, were filled with cotton and unable to draw in a breath.

She ripped her hand from his. “Stop touching me. Stop talking to me. Why are you even here?”

He leaned forward, gaze sharpening on her. “Lauren . . . What’s going on? It’s *me*, Jonah.”

“I know who you are! I’m not stupid.” Why was he being so weird? She needed Sydney. She’d be trying to make her laugh, not confusing her. She’d help Lauren make sense of all this. She would go out there and demand someone get in here. She wanted to talk to Sydney, never mind

that her friend was back home in Boston.

Lauren felt for her pocket, but she wasn't wearing her jeans. She was in a hospital gown. "Where's my phone? Get me my phone."

"It's probably still in your pants." Jonah turned and opened a cubby, grabbed her jeans, and fished through her pockets. "It's not here." He lifted her shirt, her shoes. "It must've fallen out in the barn."

She couldn't catch her breath. "I want to talk to Sydney!" Lauren couldn't seem to draw in oxygen. She needed air. The neck brace was choking her. She clawed at it.

Jonah grabbed her hands. "Honey, don't do that. It's okay. You're okay. I've got you."

"Get this off. Get it off! I can't breathe."

"I need help in here!" he hollered. "You have to stay still. Please, sweetheart. You're gonna hurt yourself."

"Leave me alone!"

A terrible foreboding filled her. Anxiety swarmed like a dozen angry bees in her head.

A commotion sounded as a nurse entered, Carson on her heels.

"Something's wrong," Jonah told the nurse. "My girlfriend can't breathe."

"Not . . . girlfriend," she squeezed out. Breathe. She needed to breathe. A horrible sense of doom washed over her, nearly swallowing her whole. Her pulse raced, pounded in her chest, in her head. She was gonna die.

God, help me.

Carson edged past Jonah. "Does she have panic attacks?"

"No, never."

Carson got in her face. "Hey, Lauren? Lauren, look at me, look at me. Let go of the C-collar, okay? I'm gonna take it off. Your CT showed no neck or spinal injuries. That's good news, huh? Off we go." The rip of Velcro sounded, and he slipped the thing off her neck. "There, is that

better? What's going on?"

The constriction didn't go away. "I feel . . . anxious. Can't breathe."

"Does your chest or anything else hurt?"

She couldn't think. Couldn't breathe.

"Lauren, does anything hurt?"

"Just—just my head."

"Something's wrong with her," Jonah said. "You have to help her."

"Her brain appeared normal on the CT. Lauren, I know you're scared, but I think you're having a panic attack. I want you to focus on breathing slowly and deeply. Watch me."

Lauren's gaze clung to Carson's. She pushed away the panic and shifted her breathing to match his.

"One breath at a time. That's it. You're doing great."

She took three more deep, slow breaths. Okay. She could breathe. Maybe she wasn't dying after all.



JONAH'S hands knotted into fists. He felt so helpless. He'd never seen that wild look in her eyes before. Never seen the complete and utter panic on her face. Lauren was cool and calm. Not flustered and fearful.

"Lauren, try counting back from one hundred." Carson's voice was soft and measured. "Can you do that for me?"

"One—one hundred." Her voice quavered. "Ninety-nine . . . ninety-eight . . ."

"There you go. Keep it going."

She was breathing normally. Her features relaxed a bit. That wild look in her eyes faded.

Relief swamped Jonah, making his legs go weak and wobbly. She wasn't having a heart attack. And she didn't have brain damage. But if that was true, why didn't she remember Graham or the barn? Why was she

acting like they weren't a couple? The questions hovered like annoying mosquitoes. It was as if she didn't remember him—or at least, remember *them*. But that couldn't be true, could it? The possibility punched the air from his lungs.

"You're feeling better, right?" Carson asked a few minutes later.

Lauren nodded.

"Hang in there. You got this." Carson edged away while the nurse stepped in and took her vitals.

He joined Jonah at the edge of the room. "I'm reasonably sure that was a panic attack, but they'll likely run some tests just to make sure. What brought this on exactly?"

Jonah shook his head. "We were just talking. She said she didn't have a dog, and she didn't remember the barn, the one she's making into an event venue—the place where she fell! And she said she's not my girlfriend—you heard that."

"Listen, she's obviously confused. I know it's disconcerting, but what matters is that we keep her calm. She's got a concussion at the very least. She needs rest." Carson glanced at Lauren who, for some odd reason, was glaring at Jonah.

"Why's she so mad at me? I swear I didn't do anything to make her angry. I'm telling you, she's not herself."

"No, I get that. Try not to take it personally. A bump on the head can cause all kinds of symptoms, including irritability. They almost always go away with time. The normal CT is a very good sign. But we don't want her having another panic attack. The less stimulation, the better." His face softened as he set a hand on Jonah's shoulder. "You might want to give her a little space."

"Okay. I'll sit over there and be quiet. I don't want her to be alone."

"Stop talking about me," Lauren snapped at Jonah.

The nurse had removed the backboard and inclined her bed a bit. She seemed so small. So helpless.

BEFORE WE WERE US

“It might be better if you step into the hall,” Carson said. “Just for a little bit. Give her some breathing room.”

Jonah’s heart gave a sudden crack. Because Carson was right. He wasn’t doing Lauren any favors. His presence, for whatever reason, only seemed to annoy her. And despite the terrible fear leaking into his veins, he had to put her health first. “Okay, you’re right.”

“The doctor will be in in a few minutes. I’ll stay until then if you want.”

“Yeah, yeah. All right.” Whatever was best for Lauren.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Amber Zimmerman

Denise Hunter is the internationally published, bestselling author of more than forty 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, 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 chai lattes, and playing drums. Denise makes her home in Indiana, where she and her husband raised three boys and are now enjoying an empty nest and three beautiful grandchildren.



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