

*The
Summer
of You
and Me*

**DENISE
HUNTER**

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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 seventh, 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 hadn't been 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 stilted houses lining the beach passed from previous generations and were revered for the memories they held rather than each square foot of beach frontage.

But come summer, the island, separated from the mainland by a

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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 sounds of blaring music, squeals of glee, calling carnies, and the mechanical whirl 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 lights. Her hair, the same chocolate brown as Maggie's, was woven

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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!

A photo accompanied Erin's text. Her best friend and sister-in-

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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 two tickets.

"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 could use some time with her cousins and Uncle Josh, who could

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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.

Ethan.

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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.

About the Author



Photo by Salve Ragonton

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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