

The most perfect love story of summer

Dedra Solt shattered her neck and a dozen other bones when she dove into the sea and struck a sand bar just below the surface. Now she and the hero who saved her have gotten married — at the very spot where fate brought them together



Ron Ballenger and Dedra Solt gathered 40 friends, chartered a yacht and tied the knot — floating above the site of her accident.



"Ron said that if he saved my life I owed him the rest of my life," laughs bride Dedra. "All it took was a little fate, luck and a sand bar," says the groom.



A little help for the bride and groom: Ron's daughter Sarah was flower girl and Dedra's son Zach was ring bearer.

By Lisa Arcella

RON BALLENGER saved Dedra Solt's life a year ago when she broke her neck diving onto a sand bar — and 354 days later, in a perfect fairy-tale ending, he married her while floating atop the fateful spot.

The drama began June 20, 1989, when a girlfriend of Dedra's asked her to go for a spin off Hilton Head, S.C. "We were on our way back to the dock, when suddenly the boat came to an abrupt stop. The driver thought the transmission had dropped out," 29-year-old Dedra recalls. In fact, they were stuck on a long sand bar. "A passing boat said, 'If someone swims out here with a rope, we'll tow you.'"

Dedra volunteered, went to the side of the boat and did "a perfect swan dive" into 18 in. of water. It was like slamming headfirst into a brick wall.

When Dedra, a critical-care nurse, floated to the surface, she knew she was in big trouble. "I can remember yelling that I thought my neck was broken — I felt like I was being electrocuted from head to toe."

All the bones behind her lungs were also broken, so even breathing became an ordeal. Dedra used what little strength she had to stop her hysterical friends from pulling her into the boat. "I pleaded, 'Please, please, don't move me... I'll die.'"

Ron Ballenger and his friend Peter Maddock had dropped anchor for a little shark fishing when: "This woman came screaming across the radio, 'Oh, God, she's dying.'" The 38-year-old service station owner recalls.

Ron sped to the sand bar and Peter

jumped out of the boat with a rope around his waist and approached Dedra. "All we could do was keep her floating," says Ron. "I knew she was broke up. Everytime she bobbed in the water, she'd scream, but thank God I didn't move her. That didn't come from any kind of medical training, just common sense."

For the next 90 minutes until the Coast Guard arrived, the only face Dedra could see was Ron's while he supported her shattered body. Just before she went completely into shock she looked into his eyes and asked him to get her 4-year-old son from school and see that he was safe.

After the emergency team took Dedra to the hospital, Ron was told that had he tried to lift her, Dedra would have died on the spot or been left permanently paralyzed.

He called the hospital for the next few days until he learned Dedra was out of danger and that she'd be in

traction for a few months. For Dedra, an active, athletic person, those months felt like years of torture.

She had to lie flat 24 hours a day and the only thing she could do was worry about her son or how she was going to pay her bills. "I went into a deep state of depression," she recalls.

"I had no income, no Social Security, no nothing. My normal weight is 120 lbs. but I dropped to 85 because I couldn't eat. Friends would visit, but nothing could cheer me up. Then Ron came bouncing in."

Ron said, "Hey, remember me?" and dumped a bag full of candy and a package of every brand of cigarette he sold at his service station on her lap. "That hit me," Dedra smiles. "I just bust out laughing, even though it hurt. It was a special moment for me because it was the first time I'd really laughed since the accident."

They continued to stay in touch and became friends, but it wasn't until

months later when Dedra took her son to a boxing match that romance blossomed. "I saw Ron sitting there and I went over and gave him a big hug and kiss and told him how special he was and how I wanted to thank him for saving me."

"He said it was a piece of cake — his favorite expression — and that he didn't want to be anyone's hero."

Ron says: "I looked at her and thought, 'Wow! Is this the same mermaid I pulled out of the water?'"

A few weeks later, to ease her fears about the water, Ron took Dedra back to the scene of the accident, spread out a picnic lunch and popped open a bottle of champagne. As the sun began to set, they looked at each other and knew it was love.

"We realized then we had a lot more in common than just the accident," says Ron.

"You don't think things like this happen in real life; it bamboozled the hell out of me."

Dedra adds: "He said that if he saved my life I owed him the rest of my life."

The couple gathered about 40 of their closest friends and with her son Zach as ring bearer and Ron's daughter Sarah as flower girl, they chartered a yacht and were married at the same spot where they had met.

"We met on a boat, we got married on a boat and we honeymooned on what else? A boat!" Ron jokes. "We took a cruise from New York to Bermuda. You can't help but believe there was someone pushing this all together. All it took was a little fate, luck and a sand bar." □



Love boat: Friends help Ron and Dedra set sail on the sea of love.