

Warm Blue Waters

Unfinished Work - Sample Only - Please do not distribute.

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Chapters 1 thru 9
Version SS Toby v5b

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Novel

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Thursday, May 26, Colorado, mid-morning.

Sarah sat perched on the edge of her bed. She'd shoved aside a pile of crap to make enough space, but underneath her, there was a book or a notepad or something.

The rest of the mattress was buried, piled high with dirty towels, t-shirts, beat-up notebooks, wrappers, 7-Eleven cups, takeout containers, remains of textbooks, and handouts, and... *Fuck, I don't know.*

And she should have been at the Denver airport an hour ago. Cleared out, packed and gone. Instead, she sat here in foggy space. Around her, bearing witness, her half of the room was a dumpster. *Got a match?*

Sarah hadn't slept in a week. And she needed a shower. And that required that she find a halfway clean towel.

The room's other half, the proverbial night and day, was pristine—in fully compliant condition, per the Student Housing Departing Student policy plastered in every stairwell. Sarah was a 22-year-old midyear transfer student, and she didn't belong in the freshman dorm. Just one more screw-up. Her one and only semester at DePew College was over. Amid the scenic outskirts of Boulder, this fine private liberal arts college with its traditional red brick Georgian architecture.

But at least she had a good roommate. Britney was a freshman of course, but she was a sane one., and at this moment, she was sitting across from Sarah, ever patient, ever chill. She sat beside her clean desk, with her pink metallic roller suitcase and a small carry-on, checking her phone. She was flying home today too, back to some nice hometown on the East coast. She over at Sarah.

"Sarah, hey, Sarah?" A pause, Britney raised her voice a notch. "Hey? You okay? Skit?"

A moment passed. The lights came back on and Sarah surfaced. "Huh? Yeah, yeah, okay."

"I got to go." Britney glanced at her phone again, her thumb hovering over the screen. "My ride's almost here. Are you okay? Are you going to make your flight?"

"Oh, yeah, hey. No, I don't think so." She picked up at something stuck on the sheet. "Can I keep my nickname?"

"What? Skit? Yes, of course."

"What are you going to do about all this?" Britney nodded at the heap. "I would have helped you with it, but where have you been? How did your finals go? You were going to retake them, right?"

"Nope." Sarah stared out the window. "Not much point really."

"All right, well, I'm going to head down." Britney stood.

Sarah stood up too and made a giant step over a pile of sneakers and crap. "Okay then. Hey, I'm gonna miss you. Thanks for putting up with me. I know this was a lot."

Britney smiled. "True, but hey, lots of good times too, and never a dull moment. I'll forever have stories to tell. You hang in there, okay."

"Sure, gonna try." Sarah paused. "I'll miss you. Brit, you were one of the only good things here."

"Thanks, you too, old lady." She grinned.

"Yep. Hey, I probably won't be back in the fall!"

"I kind of figured that." Britney smiled and they hugged again.

"Take care, and sorry about the ants."

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Thursday, May 26, later morning.

Sarah heard the elevator come and go. Britney was gone. She stepped back over the pile on the floor and found another perch. Likely she was the last student still in the dorm.

Pretty much everyone had left by yesterday.

And how was she going to get out of here? Tim would be pissed. He was already and always pissed. Tim the Father, not *Dad*. And Sarah, his only child, wasn't on his favorite daughter list these days. Actually, not for a long time. The list of screw-ups, flubs, and failures felt endless, starting with her academic performance—everything spiraling after her mom left.

Anyway, how to get the hell out of here?

She had arrived in January with one big beat-up suitcase. It had been in the closet, but then it disappeared. She had a backpack, and the RA had given her an old discarded duffel bag. She would start with that.

She began to extricate items from the heap. She'd need a garbage bag. *Oh, yeah, in the trash room.* The room was full of refuse, and she found the regular trash bags, but behind them was another box. These were ultra-jumbo XXXL sofa size. A light bulb went on. She grabbed a couple of them. One of these guys could hold a baby hippo.

She got back to her room and spread out the first bag on the floor by her bunk. Next, she pulled out each corner of the bed sheet, lifted them together, hoisted it over the bag, lowered it in, pulled up the edges of the bag, and poof! Crap gone, and the bed was clean!

Next?

She grabbed another jumbo bag, held it to the edge of the desk, and swept it all in. Then the dresser. Bag number two done. Finally, the floor went into bag three. She grabbed the three bags by the throat and dragged them down the hall. If someone saw her, maybe they'd think she was disposing of bodies. Bodies of nearly extinct baby hippos.

That was it. She stuffed a hoodie, her laptop, and a couple of paperbacks into her backpack and headed for the stairs. *I'll skip the shower.* She punched up her rideshare and descended the stairs. Hopefully, she'd avoid the RA.

The Uber, an old sedan driven by a cowboy grandpa-type, pulled to the curb. She jumped in.

"Hi, how long to the airport?"

"At least an hour."

"Crap, fuck! No!" She lost it.

"Excuse me!?" He jumped. "What the hell?"

Sarah sank lower in the backseat. "Nothing, sorry, sorry."

Once they were on the interstate, Sarah texted Tim: "On the way to the airport, traffic is horrible. I won't make the flight."

Her phone lit up.

"What happened? You're not at the airport? Bonnie? When did Sarah need to be at DIA?"

Tim made no effort to hide his frustration.

"9 a.m." spoke a woman's voice next to him.

"You needed to be there by 9. What happened?"

"I had problems in the dorm. Okay, yeah, I'm in the Uber now, but the traffic is bad. I won't reach the airport for another hour."

"What? Sarah! How?! Why didn't you leave earlier? Unbelievable." A pause accompanied by some mumbled voices. "I've got a meeting! Bonnie will book you a new flight and send the flight info. Please make the flight, Sarah!"

Sarah stared out at the rain and traffic, drivers changing lanes and honking, as if they'd get there any faster. Her phone chirped. A text from Bonnie. Her new flight info arrived. She should get to San Diego just before six.

She called Becky.

Becky appeared on screen, in her kitchen. "Hey! You're on your way?"

"I missed my flight."

"Nice."

"Yeah, whatever. I should get there around six. Can you still pick me up?"

"Sure. You're lucky I'm off today." Becky's eyes narrowed on the screen. "And what the fuck is up with your hair? Looks like roadkill rockabilly?"

"Yep, my new look. Glad you like it."

"I hate it."

"Aw, well no matter. See you soon, darling. My saviour."

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

Thursday, May 26, afternoon.

As the uber pulled up to the curb at DIA, another text from Tim: *Sarah, Bonnie says this is the last flight to SD today. Please don't miss it!*

No problem. She was in the middle seat in the back row, wedged between two buffaloes but still managed to sleep most of the flight.

Arrival at San Diego Terminal 2 East. Rain lashed the curb and the pickup lanes were pretty much gridlock. Sarah scanned the outer lanes and saw Becky's old silver Honda inching along. It was easy to spot thanks to the rusty top. She sprinted and dodged through the bumpers and jumped in, dripping wet. Behind them, a slew of honks and flashes erupted.

"Welcome to San Diego! Land of patience and joy."

"Amen."

Sarah gave her a quick hug.

"Get me the fuck out of here."

Becky eyed the single backpack. "Where's your stuff?"

"Gone."

"Huh? What do you mean? So you shipped it?"

"Nope. Bagged and dumped."

"What!? No way. All your stuff? So you have no clothes or anything?"

"Yep. I'm liberated." She held up the bag. "Here's all that's left of my worldly possessions. She lifted her backpack."

Becky stared at her. "So now what? You go out and buy all new stuff? No way. C'mon, dude."

"What do I need? You'll loan me some old shirts. I have these sweats. I do a bit of thrifting. I'm all set. My fashion days are over. And I told you I deleted all my apps. I am fully disengaged from the modern world."

"You're unhinged. So what did you do with all of it?"

"It's sitting in two hippo-sized garbage bags in the dorm's trash room." She smacked her hands on her wet jeans. "But let's change the subject. How have you been?"

"You're scaring me, girl."

"I'm fine. What's new? How is Lon-Lon?"

"Things are okay." Becky merged left. "Just too busy and broke. Working two jobs, no sleep, and we still can't get ahead of bills and rent. Life is but a dream. So it goes. But Lonny's good. He said hi." She glanced at Sarah. "It's good to see you, although you resemble a soaked infectious rat. And what is the grease shit on your head?" She reached over and touched a lock of hair. "Oh, my god."

"Thanks, it's Brylcreem."

The car pulled up to a stoplight at the freeway entrance. Sarah leaned over to give Becky a big squeeze. After ten seconds, she still hadn't let go. Becky struggled to disengage.

"Okay, that's enough, bitch! You're slobbering. I know you're starved..."

"But I have needs," Sarah said, holding on.

"Totally not my problem—in so many ways. And you're getting that grease all over me.

Fuck!" She shoved Sarah back.

"Owww..." Sarah pouted, back in her seat.

"Jesus. You need a boyfriend. Or batteries for your Buzz Buddy."

"Oops, I left that behind. Anyway, I'm good. Celibacy is my new religion." She wiped the window. "You'd have loved this school. I got put in the freshman dorm, right? What a collection of brats and tools. Playing cowboy, red flannel socks, it was a roughrider drag show." She paused. "Has Lonny proposed yet?"

"No, and shut up. Things are good just the way they are."

"Are you thinking about going back to school?"

"Hell, no. Why would I do that? Get a worthless degree, be even more broke, and have a \$100,000 student loan. No thanks."

"Yeah." Sarah watched the wipers slap back and forth. "I'd forgotten how much it rains here."

"Only when you come."

"Wow, hello, welcome home, Sarah. How is your chronic, untreated depression?"

"Geez, the queen of theatrics, ladies and gentlemen."

"Speaking of which, guess who I heard from? Melissa."

"Really, what's up with her?"

"Can't really tell. As usual. Anyway, she's looking for a roommate."

"Where is she now?"

"Still living with her wacko mom, but she's getting a place up north, around Encinitas. Her new job is up there."

"Well, she wouldn't be my first choice."

"No kidding, but my options are limited."

The rain trailed off and traffic opened up heading east.

"So Tim's in El Cajon? Or is it *Los Cojones* for plural?"

"Yes, that's it. Good one. Apparently, it's an enormous wasteland. Ten thousand huge box homes. They call it Paco Gorda. Sounds like a Taco Bell menu item. Pretty sure the whole thing is built on a fault line, or it will incinerate in the next wildfire, but hey, luxury living."

"Doesn't that apply to most of California?"

"Sure. Anyway, I can't wait to see it, five bedrooms, six baths, a four-car garage. Next year he's planning to build a pool."

"Oh god. This is your first time going there, right?"

"Yeah, he just moved in last month."

"Does it have any furniture?"

"Not 100% sure. But guessing Just on the first floor. Although "my room" upstairs has a bed. Per the plan, That's all I need for a few days before I'm shipped off to Orlando."

"What!? What's in Orlando?"

"One of their call centers. I'll be the chipper chick when you want to order those Phish tickets. But I'll break your heart when I tell you they're sold out. So sorry. But how about Barry Manilow for \$600? Then at least I can tell you about another \$200 in fees."

"Lovely."

"Yeah. That's where I'm at."

A half hour later, they reached the address and pulled into the driveway of a jumbo Georgian knockoff.

"Impressive. It sure makes a statement."

Sarah nodded.

"You've saved my life. Again." She deepened her voice, theatrical and booming. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you..."

Becky jerked up her arm. "God, stop! Get outta here, get some sleep. And a shower! You look and smell like dog meat."

"Wow. Accurate, but hurtful. See ya!"

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Thursday, May 26, evening.

Becky's taillights faded away down the winding road. Sarah stood alone on the driveway. No lights from the neighboring houses, no movement. Home?

She walked to the keypad and punched the code. The garage door glided up. A single bulb lit the empty concrete.

Darkness filled the hallway. Past the shadows of pantry doors, the kitchen opened up under the snap of the light switch. Bare counters. Beyond that, a living room of chrome and leather furniture sat in silence. Nothing else.

Inside the fridge were three protein shakes and a carton of eggs.

Eight p.m. No sign of Tim. She texted, *I am here.*

The phone buzzed. A reply came, *Great, I should get there about 10.*

In the foyer, a switch flooded the space with light from an oversized glass chandelier. A wide staircase rose in front of her, white and stark. She turned the light off and climbed. The second floor still smelled of latex and flooring adhesive. She opened the doors, one by one. Five bedrooms, a study, two bathrooms. All empty except one. A bed, a table, a small shelf. An Amazon box sat on the mattress: shrink-wrapped sheets, comforter, pillows.

She needed a shower. Both bathrooms were empty. No towels or soap or shampoo. She texted again.

Are there bath towels?

Check downstairs.

At least there was hot water. After cleaning up, she pulled the sheets from their plastic and made the bed. She lay down. The stiff cotton was cool against her skin. She started a movie on her phone, propping it on the pillow beside her. Ten minutes later, she turned it off.

The room went dark. A distant streetlight cast a faint glow against the glass. She closed her eyes.

She was stirred awake by the sound of a garage door. She heard her dad in the kitchen, and a few minutes later, footsteps on the stairs. A soft knock. Tim stood in the doorway, silhouetted. When was the last time she'd seen him?

"Hey. You made it." He frowned at the shadows and flipped the switch. The bare ceiling fixture blasted light. "Sorry, we need some lamps, I guess."

"Hi." Sarah shielded her eyes, sat up, and walked over. They hugged quickly.

"So," he stepped back. "I'm sure you're tired. I know I am. Things are crazy right now. Let's catch up in the morning. Sleep tight. I'll have to work this weekend."

"Okay. Good night."

He turned and left. Sarah hit the light switch. The room went dark. No sound. Only his footsteps going down the stairs.

Could she sleep? This was like a float tank compared to the dorm.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Friday, May 27, California.

The bedroom was a meat locker. In fact, so was and the whole second floor. Sarah checked the hallway thermostat. It was still showing 80°. She had pushed every button, even tried shutting it off, but the unit just kept running. She pulled on her hoodie and headed downstairs.

The coffee maker popped and hissed in the kitchen. Tim walked in, head down, in a charcoal suit, phone pressed to his ear. He waved a hand—distracted, brief—and grabbed an energy drink from the fridge. He muted the call and pulled her into a one-armed hug. "Office. Dinner here tonight? Let's talk about your summer."

"Sure."

A minute later, the throaty rumble of his beamer came from the garage, then down the driveway and gone. The garage door rumbled shut. The house settled into a heavy, artificial silence. Sarah leaned against the white quartz island, her phone cold in her hand. In Oak Park, the kitchen had smelled like fish sauce, curry, and wild jasmine. Her mom would hum in Thai while Grandpa Ted spread sailing charts across the kitchen table. Now, there was only the electric drone of the Sub-Zero. Everything in this house was stainless and empty. And no place to sit.

She drained the lukewarm coffee and set the mug in the sink. But too hard, too loud in the quiet. Sarah leaned against the counter and pulled out her phone.

Sarah: *Hang tonight? Trip the Light fantastic?*

Becky: *Sure, chickie. I already warned Lonnie.*

Sarah: *Ubering over. In need of pants and a couple tops. And a decent latte. Mostly, right now, a change of scenery.*

The house was too barren and silent. Not like the house back in Oak Park with her mom. Back then, the smell of wild jasmine from the backyard used to fill her room. Her mom would speak Thai in the kitchen. Sarah's grandparents would stop by and discuss the weekend sailing plan. Now, there was just the hum of the stainless-steel fridge and no place to sit. She stood and knocked down the coffee.

A notification popped up: *Uber 3 mins.* Then the screen changed to an incoming call. *Tim.* She swiped. He was talking before she hit the speaker.

"Orlando, Sarah. I've spoken with the shift supervisor. Bonnie can have the arrangements made by this afternoon. You could be there next week."

"Give me a few days to think."

"About what? Do you have other options?"

"Not at the moment."

"Then you need to do this."

Sarah gripped the edge of the counter, the "shove off" dying in her throat. "Grandpa Ted asked me to visit."

"That's a vacation. You don't need a vacation. Orlando is the choice for now."

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

Friday, May 27, evening.

Sarah sat on the front stoop of Tim's house. It was a weird day, a bit chilly and she felt the cold through her jeans. She had not seen another car or person along the road. Then headlights down at the corner turned toward her, and Becky's Civic pulled up. She strolled over and jumped in.

"Good evening. You found some clothes." Becky asked from the driver's seat.

Sarah got in. "I had the hoodie and the jeans. So we're heading for the big "K", although it's early."

"I don't think they have live bands anymore. I actually haven't been there since the last time we went, which was what, like two years ago, right?"

"Sounds right." Sarah nodded.

Becky had some Bowie on. Heroes. The traffic wasn't bad, even once they got into the city. They took the exit off National Avenue. The K Club was down in Barrio Logan. Becky found a space on a side street, the tires bumping against the curb. The same dimly lit sign hung over the doorway of the club, casting a weak, buzzing glow. Inside, a sleeveless, juiced-up bouncer dozed on a stool. He opened one eye as they passed and nodded them through. The place was empty. Sarah breathed in the familiar mix of stale beer, piss, and cheap disinfectant. "Wow, smells the same."

They walked past the long, elaborate old bar. Its mismatched stools stood like crooked teeth. Behind the bar, mirrored shelves held a grim collection of bottles, lit by a few struggling, backlit panels and haphazard strands of multicolor LEDs. They headed down a dim hallway, past the bathrooms and stacks of cardboard boxes. The black matte walls were torn and grungy.

The backroom opened up, a large void with a DJ booth in one corner and a small stage waiting for a band. Tattered, half-torn posters clung to the walls under layers of flat black, drippy paint.

"Not much has changed," Becky walked over to the stage.

"Yep, pretty derelict."

They walked back to the front and claimed a couple of stools. The bouncer's voice croaked from his post. "Hey, customers!"

Sarah jumped, her hand flying to her chest.

A tattooed woman in her mid-thirties emerged from the back. "Howdy. What can we get you?"

Sarah smiled. "Hi, can we get two beers and a couple of shots."

"Whoa, not me. Just a beer," Becky said.

"Awww." Sarah gave Becky a look. "Yeah, you're right. Just the beers."

An hour later, a group of goth kids walked in, a swirl of flipped hair and raccoon eyeshadow. Sarah watched them approach the bar. "Oh my God, they look like they're in middle school."

A snort escaped Becky. "Yep."

The bartender walked over to them. "Can I see some ID?" The kids held theirs out, prepared.

"Hey, she didn't card us," Sarah murmured.

"Yeah, girl, we're over the hill. Twenty-two and done." Becky set her empty bottle on the bar.

"One more?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah, and that'll do it for me."

Sarah ordered the beers and paid. She tilted her head toward the speakers. "What's this music?"

"Not sure. I am not keeping up these days."

The bartender walked by to clear some glasses. Sarah caught her eye. "Is Noah still around?"

"Oh no, I think he moved back to Chicago. That was before my time."

"Ah, okay, thanks." Sarah put a tip on the bar. "Let's get out of here."

"Ready, Eddy."

Outside, the street was deserted, the sound of the interstate was this deep, dull hum. They stepped over broken sidewalks, the smell of a taco stand dumpster hanging in the air. They had just reached the corner when a deep thumping started up—a bass so low it vibrated through the soles of their shoes. A few blocks ahead, a lifted, double-axle pickup rumbled toward them, flashing LEDs glowing from under its chassis. It crept along, headed their way. The occupants came into view—a collection of redneck bros hanging out the windows of the crew cab.

Sarah crossed her arms, her chin tilted up toward the rumbling engine. "Here comes the local cracker bus."

They stood and watched the truck cruise by. The driver honked a weird siren sound. One of them hung half his body out the window, yelling. "Hey, Hey!!! Stop! Some ladies! Some punk rock BABES!" The pickup continued down the block, the guy still screaming into the night. After they passed, Sarah swung around, walking backwards and threw up her middle finger.

"Don't do that." Becky's hand shot out for Sarah's arm, but it was too late.

That guy was yelling now and the brake lights flashed bright red. They shut off the pounding woofers and were making a u-turn.

"Shit, they're coming back. Move!"

She and Becky sprinted back to the car, dove in and crawled down. One, two, three, four, and the truck reached the corner and came towards them. That one guy kept yelling. If they were under a street light, they would have been seen but the truck rolled by and shot back around the corner, its headlights sweeping the street.

"God damn it," Becky hissed as bent over to stay in the shadow of the footwell.

"Thank god for broken street lights and your tinted windows." Sarah whispered.

They heard the truck at the end of the block.

"Where the hell did they go? Check the alley, man!"

The truck reversed past them again, then floored it down the alley, the engine revving as they shot down the narrow space.

"Let's go!" Becky hissed. She scrambled into her seat and started the engine. She left the lights off, pulled out, and did a hard U-turn, tires sliding on the asphalt. They got to the corner and sped away. Becky watched the rearview. So far, no sign of them.

After a few tense blocks, she flipped on the headlights and they crossed under the interstate.

"Okay, well, that was fun. You're back here for 24 hours and just about get us killed." Becky checked her rearview mirror again. They'd head up to Market Street where there were lights and traffic.

"Yeah, fuck, sorry." Sarah rubbed her face. "No need for any of that. What a blast."

"You know, they probably would have come after us even if you didn't flip them off." Becky shrugged.

"Yeah, true. Still, that was bullshit." Sarah rocked a bit. "Jesus, you remember we used to walk around there all the time after they closed. That's nuts." She let her head fall back against the seat, a long, shuddering breath escaping her lips. The silence in the car was heavy, broken only by the engine's hum.

"So what now, Sherlock?" Becky looked at her.

Sarah regrouped a bit and sat up. "Can we get something to eat? I didn't get dinner. I'll buy. How about ramen? Tonkatsu, baby!"

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Friday, May 27, California.

The ramen bowls sat empty between them. Becky looked up from her phone. "So, did you meet anyone interesting at that school? What was the name of it?"

becky sounds preppy

"DePew."

"Oh, like Pepé Le Pew?"

"Never thought of that, but yeah, that's a match. Swipe right. God, I wish I had this year back."

"So, any dudes of interest?"

"Nope. Not a one. It was Douche Bag Central, overrun with Young Republicans. They all thought I was a freak."

"You are a freak." Becky smiled at her. "Since always."

"Thanks. And I still prove it every day." Sarah grimaced. "Anyway, yeah, at that place, no social life, no dates. My roommate was a sweetheart, though. I probably drove her nuts. I told you they put me in the freshman dorm, right?"

"Yeah, that's hysterical. Biker punk Sarah strolling down the halls past a bunch of tweaker freshmen."

"I tried to be cool. I had one professor that I liked. But then the Adderall started giving me trouble. I couldn't sleep. And the rest of my classes were just shit. Lousy teachers, lousy program." She downed the rest of her drink. "Don't know, don't care, but here I am. Wanna go shopping tomorrow? I need underwear."

Becky side-eyed her. "Says the girl that put all her clothes in a dumpster."

When they pulled into the driveway, there were no lights on inside or out.

"He's not home yet."

"Yep. Likely pulling an all-nighter. Maybe he and Bonnie are discussing plan versus actuals."

"You make that sound dirty."

"As intended." Sarah nodded back. "Wanna come in and see the Better Homes Digest House of the Year?"

"God, no."

"Your loss. You're missing out on a whole lot of empty rooms and one floor of gleaming white and chrome he bought from a model home." She leaned over and gave Becky a hug. "Anyway, darling, thanks as always, and sorry about nearly getting us murdered tonight."

"What would I do without you?"

"Probably you'd still be in a jail cell in Tijuana."

"You promised never to mention that."

"Why? It was your finest moment. By the way, what are Sarah's summer plans?"

"No flipping idea. Might as well ask her about hedge funds or the apocalypse."

"Oh no, you've gone to referring to yourself in third person."

"You started it. And anyway, it helps."

"Cool. Well, say Hi to your grandpa for me next time you talk. I miss him."

"Yeah, me too."

Sarah entered the house and went up the stairs, two at a time. She left the light off and sat in the dark, the laptop's glow reflecting in her eyes. It was 8 a.m. in Vietnam. She tapped a name on her phone, and a big, smiling old guy's face appeared.

"Hey kiddo! Where ya been? Are you still at school?"

"Nope. Back in San Diego. At Tim's house."

"Great. You caught me in the middle of yet another bilge pump repair. Hold on while I clean off my hands." He put the phone down, pointing it straight up at the cabin's teak ceiling.

The phone wobbled, and his face filled the screen again. "So! You are back in San Diego?" He went up some steps and stood in the cockpit. He panned the phone across the marina, the docks cluttered with masts and lines.

"God, it's hot there," Sarah said.

"It is. It's the tropics." Grandpa Ted grinned.

"So, how are things?"

"Just fine. Can't complain. So, are you going to come and visit? I know an excellent hamburger joint."

"Fly to Vietnam to eat a hamburger?"

"Of course!"

"How's the boat? You haven't sent any pictures lately."

"Ah, my dear boat. You know it's hard to answer that. Most of the time, I love it. Then sometimes, I want to fill it full of rocks and sink it in the harbor. There's never a day that something doesn't need fixing."

Sarah laughed, the sound a little rough from disuse. The tightness in her shoulders eased for the first time all day.

"I'll send you new boat photos right after we hang up. I have her just about ready for an ocean sail. Spent the last month on the teak and the windlass. We are ready! Speaking of which, I told you Benny is out of action. He has to go for hip surgery in September, so I'm in need of a crew. I have a trip planned to Palau in a couple of weeks. Know of anyone I could coerce into sailing with me? Like maybe my favorite granddaughter?"

"Grandpa, you only have one granddaughter, and you're on the phone with her right now."

"Let's not quibble." His eyes crinkled, betraying the stern set of his mouth.

"You told Tim you want me to visit this summer?"

"Yes, you'd really enjoy it. It's such a different world here. You can help me on the boat, we can sail out across the beautiful blue ocean. And the food is amazing."

"I need a lot of practice. I'm not sure I can ocean sail."

"That's fair. It's totally up to you. Oh, your dad mentioned he wanted you to go work in a call center."

"Not happening. I'll go back to slinging cappuccinos or herding goats before I do that."

"I figured that. So, do you want to think about it? It's beautiful here. Although a bit steamy. And it rains like you won't believe."

"Wow, you really know how to sell it. Is there AC on the boat?"

"Nope. But we have wifi. I watch penguins and polar bears on YouTube. That helps me cool off."

"That works, does it?" She raised an eyebrow at the laptop screen.

"Absolutely."

"And what's the town you're in?"

"Phan Thiết. A small coastal city in the south. My boat's in the marina here. I'll send you a pin drop on Maps. Check it out. Let me know if you want to come. I'll have your cabin ready. With a life jacket. And you'll get to be a sailor again. Love you, sweetheart."

"G'night, grandpa."

She hung up, the screen going dark. The silence of the empty house pressed in. *Phan Thiết*. She grabbed her phone, pulled up Maps, and found the pin he'd sent. Her thumb hovered over the blue dot on the coast of the South China Sea. A boat. A passport. A life jacket.

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

Saturday, May 28, California.

The distant garage door clanked, and her dad's car rumbled off. Same as every day. While the coffee brewed, a text appeared on her phone. *Have you decided on Orlando? Let me know today so I can finalize the arrangements. We've got rooms at a Residence Inn and there's a shuttle, so you won't need a car.*

Her thumb hovered over the screen. *Sounds lovely, Dad. But sorry. No fucking way.*

She grabbed her coffee and headed to the patio. A new seating set sat under the eaves, most of it still wrapped in plastic. She unwrapped the plastic from one of the chairs. Fresh out of the box, right from the factory in China. Orlando would smell like a factory. Cattle cubicles in a drone of voices. Maybe stay in San Diego. No way to pay the rent. And why? What she *should* do and what she *would* do? According to whom?

She look at the message again and shoved the phone in her pocket. The alternative sat there, scary, outrageous, but easy. *Vietnam. Grandpa Ted. A sailboat.*

She knew this was not a coin toss, although it would be great to just leave it up to a flip, heads or tails. She trusted that about as much as her own judgement. But there was no point in going to "click-it-master". She wouldn't last a month or even a week. And then she'd be even more stranded. *Can you be a little stranded vs a lot?*

It was better to stay in motion. That always seemed to help her stay calm. Done. Decided. She stood and went inside.

Around noon, an Uber dropped her at Becky's shop just as Becky finished her shift.

"I think I am going to Vietnam. Wanna go? We can stay on Grandpa Ted's boat."

"You're funny. But seriously, you're thinking about going?"

"Yep, I mentioned it to you awhile back."

"I know, but I didn't think it was a real plan."

"It will save me from Orlando." A laugh escaped her, sharp and sudden. "If I don't go somewhere, I'll be working in a Clickit Blaster call center by the end of the week."

"Oh god."

"Yes, and when you call to buy your One Direction tickets, I can tell you, 'Sorry, Peaches, they're all sold out!'"

"You don't have to leave right away. Stay with Lonny and me."

"And destroy your marriage?"

"Again, bitch, we're not married. And Lonny likes you."

"In small doses."

Becky chewed on her lower lip. "Yeah, that's true."

"Thanks." The corner of her mouth ticked up. "Anyway, I appreciate the offer. But it's a perfect time to go visit him. Do Vietnam for the summer. I'll figure out my life and come

back free from doubts and suffering. And I want to see my grandpa. And sail. How many more years will he have a boat, right?"

Becky's shoulders slumped. "I'll be sad if you leave. You just got here."

They shopped for necessities before Becky took her to their apartment for dinner with Lonny. The house was dark and quiet when Sarah returned. On her laptop, the blue light of travel blogs flickered across her face, images of Halong Bay and floating markets blurring together. A clock in the corner of the screen showed 8:00 AM. Vietnam time.

She clicked the call button.

"Okay, Grandpa, I am coming to see you!"

"Whoa! Very cool! Let me do a little dance!" A wide grin spread across Grandpa Ted's face on the screen.

"Do you want me to start looking for flights? Try for something in a week or two?"

"No need, dear. Already done."

"What?"

"Yes, I booked it, refundable, a few weeks back. I was pretty confident I could talk you into it. And I still have lots of points."

"So when do I fly?"

"How about Monday late afternoon?"

"No way. Can I go that soon?"

"You have your passport, right?"

"Yes."

"And you know how to do the eVisa. Just expedite it. It'll be done by Monday."

"Yep. Alrighty then. Bon Voyage, Vietnam!"

"Excellent! Okay then. I will see you Tuesday?"

"Well, it will feel like Tuesday—but when you reach Vietnam, it will be Wednesday. I think in the morning, let me check." A short pause. "Yep, you'll arrive around 10am local time."

"Right, okay. Well, I guess I better get ready! I'll let Dad know. I am sure he'll be pleased to hear that I am leaving... I mean, that I am coming to visit." A small snort escaped her.

"I'll send you the flight info. You will fly first to Hong Kong and then a short flight to Ho Chi Minh City. It's a long flight, but you can sleep most of it."

"Right, amazing. See you soon."

She signed off and let out a long sigh. That's done. At least she had a place to go. Monday. It was late, but she texted Becky anyway: *Remember you asked me how long I'd be in town? New answer: until Monday. Leaving then to go see Grandpa Ted.*

Her phone rang instantly.

"What?! Vietnam!? Monday!? How can you do that? No way! You're kidding me."

"Sorry, nope, just talked to him. He already booked the flight."

"How could you get a ticket that soon?"

"Grandpa did it. He's got a ton of points."

"And you can actually leave that soon? Visa, shots, packing?"

"Done. I have everything. Remember, I was planning to go see him at the end of last year, but Tim said I had to go back to school. Anyway, you're busy, busy."

"Don't say that. I was just making plans for us." Sarah could hear the frown in her voice. "I am very sad now. I thought we could hang out. How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know. Maybe a month. Maybe I'll hate it, but it's better this way. If I don't do something, Tim is going to send me to Orlando, and I'll be selling Moody Blues tickets to Boomers over the phone. I would rather drag my ass across gravel and broken glass."

"And if I stick around here, what am I going to do? I don't want a car. You told me you're crazy busy right now between work and Lonny... and then there's the wedding to plan." A wet, staticky sound came through the phone—a raspberry. "If there's a wedding, you're not invited."

"I know that. Anyway, I figure I'll stay there a month. I'll learn to sail again. I'll become a sunburnt raisin and figure out what to do with the rest of my life that doesn't require me to live in a place like Orlando."

"A great plan, like all the others. So let's get together tomorrow, okay? Lonny's working. I can come pick you up around lunchtime."

"You can take me shopping?"

"Of course. Goodwill or Walmart, I assume." The line went quiet for a beat. "When you're over there, you better text me every day."

"Or what?"

"I'll be sad."

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

Sunday, May 29, California.

Early. No garage door. Had Tim even come home?

Sarah typed: *I am flying to Vietnam to see Grandpa Ted. Leaving tomorrow.*

Her phone buzzed after a minute. *What? When?*

She stared at the screen. *Tomorrow*, she typed back.

No, that doesn't work. Let's discuss. Everything is set for Orlando. Maybe see Grandpa at Christmas?

Of course he'd say that. Now he was calling.

"Hi, I just have a minute. Let's discuss this tonight. I'll have some Thai food delivered. How did he get you on a flight for Monday?" He sounded like he was in the bathroom and someone had just walked in.

"I think I should go see Grandpa first," It wouldn't be an argument. She'd tell him she'd be back in two weeks. And maybe she would.

She called Becky right after.

"So you're dodging Orlando?"

"That's right."

Becky's voice crackled through the speaker. "You're actually doing it. You'll be sailing the ocean blue. Skinny dipping in tropical lagoons, crossing oceans, chasing stars--like some kind of—"

"I don't know about crossing oceans. Only day trips. Coastal sailing. I don't know if I can handle—"

"Yeah, that's smart. Because honestly, I watched this movie with that old actor. He's guy alone on his sailboat in the middle of ocean, first off, you gotta be crazy, well, the middle of the night, and his boat hits some random shipping container floating out there, and it starts to sink and—"

"Okay, yeah, I saw that. Thanks, real helpful."

"I'm serious. How do you even sleep out there? Those guys that sail solo?"

"I don't know, mama. Again, no ocean trips for me. But I'll ask when I get there. They've got some kind of GPS warning, and other stuff. But yes, you gotta know what you're doing."

"Hey, I'm sure it will be amazing, a different world. And just abandoning me. Not even here a week while I'm stuck working two jobs and going broke."

"Yeah, I know. And you're in much better shape than me." Sarah lay back on her bed.

Outside her window, the neighborhood was empty and silent.

"As far as Vietnam, I'm guess it's just temporary. I don't know how long I can stay. But I'm not going to Orlando. Ever. I need to have a plan for when I come back."

"Gotcha. But you're still a traitor. But also—" Becky's tone shifted, softer. "Way to go, girl!"

Around 6 p.m., Tim came through the door. "Food's going to be late. I've got a crisis call. Production jobs failed again." He was already heading toward his home office. "Sorry, how are—"

"I'm good," Sarah said.

He nodded, distracted. "Okay, yeah. So you're leaving tomorrow."

Thirty minutes later, the food arrived. Tim was still on a Zoom call with people who didn't sound happy. Some exec from London was making his voice sharp and clipped. Sarah unpacked the containers, set a plate next to his laptop, and ate at the far end of the kitchen island.

Tim took four bites. "Shit. I have another call." He muted himself, glanced at Sarah. "When is your return flight? Well, text me, okay? Do you need cash? Where's your passport? What about your visa? And what time?"

"Tomorrow. I'm all set. Becky'll drop me off."

"Okay." He was already reaching for the keyboard. "I'll say goodnight when you're upstairs." He switched his camera back on, voice cheerful. "Philippe! Thanks for joining. Hey, Engineering is working on the fix as we..."

The next morning, Sarah didn't see Tim before he left. There was cash on the kitchen counter. She slung her backpack over one shoulder—shorts, shirts, her laptop, a few paperbacks—and walked out.

The Uber driver took the freeway. San Diego blurred past: office parks, freeways, the sprawl of things she'd lived inside for so long she'd stopped seeing them.

Security. Gate. Seat. Window. The flight to Hong Kong was fourteen hours. She put on cheap headphones and picked an action movie. A car chase through New York. Then helicopters and explosions. They got away. She drifted off.

She woke to a flight attendant offering a tray. She sat up and ate and watched some videos she'd downloaded. And then another nap. In the fog between waking and dreaming, she saw a crowded market, scooters and small trucks, grilling meat and fried rice, exhaust and smoke, and smiles, and voices in a language she'd never heard.

Hong Kong airport. Signs. Connection. Different airline, smaller plane. Three hours to Ho Chi Minh City.

As the plane climbed over the South China Sea, the cabin window framed an endless expanse of blue. Grandpa's boat. Forty-four feet. Her bedroom was bigger than the whole cabin. Days and nights on open water. Constant rocking.

She pressed her forehead against the window.

Just water, blue water. Forever.

Her breath caught a moment. She stared out until the clouds swallowed the view.

Thailand was to the west. Just a two hour flight to Bangkok. Her mom was there.

END OF SAMPLE