

House of the
Blue Sea



Teresa van Bryce



Handwritten Press

Prologue

The road, like two dark ribbons on a sheet of bright, white paper, merged into blackness beyond the reach of her headlights. Sandra blinked, then blinked again, squeezing her eyes tight before opening them. Even though she was travelling at just sixty kilometres an hour, the falling snow seemed to drive directly into her eyes, hypnotic and disorienting. She rolled down the car window, the rush of cold air scentless and sharp—but the blast of winter air wasn't working. She was going to have to stop. Probably best not to cross the Canada/US border this late at night anyway. There wasn't much for miles on the other side but wide open Montana cattle country.

It felt like a week since she'd woken up at home this morning and looked out at the coming dawn, the grey light crawling in through the slats of the bedroom blind. It was snowing, and she'd burrowed further down under the covers, pulling them up over her head to block out the light. Rufus whined from his bed on the floor beside hers and she lifted the blanket, patting the mattress to invite him under the covers with her. When the little dog had settled into the curve of her body, they'd both fallen asleep, feeling each other's heartbeats, his wiry coat pressed against her flannel pajamas.

It was nearly noon by the time Sandra dragged herself from the warmth of her bed and headed downstairs to make coffee. Rufus trotted beside, undoubtedly hoping for breakfast, looking up at her with each step. When her bare feet touched the cool of

the main floor hardwood she stopped. The cordless phone lay on its back, alone in the middle of the dining room table, noiselessly shouting the many messages it held. She turned and took the first two stairs before stopping again, her hand resting on the railing. Frozen. She stood. And then, just like that, she knew ... she needed to get away. She couldn't take one more phone call, one more card, one more well-meaning friend unable to carry on a normal conversation.

Despite the sense of urgency that grew in her as the afternoon wore on, Sandra cleaned the house as she always did before going on a trip—a habit left over from growing up with her mother. If there'd been a fire in the middle of the night her mother would have had to make the bed before escaping the blaze. Sandra filled a duffel bag with a few random items of clothing and toiletries, put Rufus in the car, and set off south on the Queen Elizabeth II Highway.

That was hours ago. The weather was making it slow going, particularly after dark. She still didn't know where she was going, only that she had to go. South. In four hours that was all she'd come up with. South. Out of the cold, out of winter and away from this interminable heaviness.

One

It was like following a house. *On the road ... still* — *Marion and Tom Braithwaite* was written in scrolling purple font across the back of the motorhome. Below the lettering, a multi-coloured graphic of a map of the US had all but a few of the states filled in to show the places they had travelled. Barney. They called their RV Barney. It was grey but with a slight lilac hue, which is why, Sandra assumed, it had been given the name.

How different she felt from four years ago when she'd travelled this same road. When she thought back to that trip it seemed she'd driven the entire way in darkness, but of course that wasn't the case. She'd left home at night in a blinding snow but travelled the rest of the distance in daylight. Darkness had been a state of mind.

She had met the Braithwaites her second trip south. They were on a blog of Baja-bound travellers looking to caravan up for the journey. It was safer that way—of course it was. With a more sane mind, it was clearly a good idea. When she'd first met Marion and Tom they'd chastised her for the reckless behaviour the year before. Sandra was younger than their sixty years by just a decade, but they took her under their wing like a daughter and spoke to her as such.

Almost at the border, a few more miles and they'd be in Mexico, and in those few feet across an invisible line on the earth, everything changed. From Canada to the US was barely noticeable but going into Mexico you instantly knew you had crossed

a border. The flat storefronts with bold lettering painted on their faces for signs, small late model cars and trucks replacing the herds of SUVs further north, old school buses used for urban transit, and a general increase in activity and noise that couldn't be attributed to any one thing. Food and music were everywhere. Just try to walk one block in a Mexican town without finding something to eat or hearing music piped out onto the street from a restaurant or store. It was like an assault on the senses, but in a good way. Sandra loved it.

From the Mexican border to the south end of the Baja Peninsula required about twenty hours of driving. They'd done it in two days that first year, she and Rufus, pulling off the road before it got dark; at least she'd had that much sense. She had been looking forward to this year's journey since the first snowflake hit the ground back home, and this time she would stay longer. Life at home wasn't exactly hectic, now that she was more of an arm's length owner in the company without a daily role, but friends, family, animals, and a house offered their own kind of pressure, one that Sandra enjoyed being free of during her Mexico stays. She hadn't brought Rufus along since that first unplanned journey south and, although she missed his constant presence in her day, she revelled in the freedom of daily life in Baja, like she was an observer, dipping in and out of the world as and when she chose, not beholden to anyone or anything.

Four years ago, she wouldn't have thought it possible to feel happy being alone, now it was the key to her contentedness. Each winter she felt more at home, more at peace, the beauty and tranquility of the Sea of Cortez filling the void that had threatened to swallow her each day that first year. She'd drifted through those days in a fog that was finally burned away by the Mexican sunshine in the final week of the visit.

And now Baja drew her like Mecca, its desert landscape and turquoise blue waters pulling at her each winter and inspiring the work she'd begun on canvas her second trip down. It was such

House of the Blue Sea

an easy place to be inspired, and oh-so-easy to get caught up in the pace of life in Mexico—*mañana*.

Sandra took a deep breath as she climbed out of her SUV; the moist air carried the mingled scents of salt, seaweed and something floral. She stretched her arms above her head and turned slowly in place, taking in the 360-degree view. A small boutique hotel, Casa del Mar Azul rested seaside, its white-washed face looking onto the Sea of Cortez; its backdrop the foothills of the Sierra de la Laguna mountain range. Casa del Mar Azul—House of the Blue Sea.

Mar Azul reminded Sandra of photos she'd seen of Spanish seaside villas. In fact, it was what had drawn her here in the first place. Four years before, on her second night in Mexico, she'd stopped at a small hotel and a brochure in their lobby caught her attention. It had an image of a white and blue villa, sitting right at the edge of the sea. Ever since she'd written a report on the Mediterranean in junior high, Sandra had wanted to visit Spain, but when she swore off flying in her early twenties, she gave up the idea of travel to Europe, unless she wanted to drive across North America and take a boat over the Atlantic. *Visit Casa del Mar Azul and drink in serenity* was written below the photo. It had called to her four years ago, and every year since.

Sandra leaned into the car and adjusted the rear view mirror so she could see herself. The humidity was playing havoc with her straw-coloured hair so she tucked it behind her ears in an attempt to tame the curls and waves. The hours on the road had painted faint shadows under her green eyes, but the heat had given her high cheekbones a natural blush so, all-in-all, she looked presentable.

She pulled her purse and a leather shoulder bag from the passenger seat and took the pebbled pathway to the hotel entrance, the tiny white stones crunching under her canvas deck

shoes. The bougainvillea hung thick and fragrant from the roof's overhang, and its bright pink blossoms brushed Sandra's shoulder as she passed. She stopped and leaned her face toward a cluster of flowers and inhaled their honeysuckle-like scent. She closed her eyes, the feel of the air surrounding her like loving arms.

"Ms. Lyall, so good to see you again. Welcome back." Paul was standing in the doorway to the lobby, watching her.

Sandra took the final steps to the hotel, reaching for his outstretched hand. "And it is very good to be back. I've been looking forward to visiting Mar Azul since ... well, since I left last year. I was just enjoying the captivating aromas of Cortez."

"Ah yes." He tilted his head back and inhaled. "It's easy to become complacent. Thanks for the reminder. Come in, come in." Paul led her inside and took up his station behind the front desk.

There was something about Paul's face that said *welcome* even before he spoke the word; and the lobby of Casa del Mar Azul reflected his warm nature. Two overstuffed chairs sat along one wall with a rattan table between them covered in magazines, while the walls were decorated with art and keepsakes from Paul's life and travels.

Sandra gestured to the open windows along the side of the lobby. "The weather is perfect, as always."

"I order it up special for your visits. No rain, no storms off the Pacific, and enough wind to keep you cool."

"Well, thank you. This northerner appreciates the refreshing breeze."

Paul Hutchings was an ex-pat from England and his face showed the telltale signs of fifty-plus years of smiling. Sandra's first exposure to British culture had been through her older brother William's passion for everything Monty Python, and Paul reminded her of one of the Python actors, the fair-haired one with the incredibly happy face. (Although Paul's fair hair

appeared to be exiting stage left.) When she'd first met him four years earlier, she'd half expected him to break into a chorus of "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life" from behind the hotel desk. Staying at Mar Azul felt like visiting the home of an old friend who was ever so happy to see her; exactly what she needed four years ago and a pleasure that hadn't worn off.

"I've given you the room on the west corner at the front. I recall you being rather a sunset junkie." Paul pushed a key card across the desk.

"Yes, and sunrise. I guess I like the sun, period. And those moments when it's coming up or going down are the most magical. Don't you think?"

"Indeed." Paul nodded and smiled as he typed something into the computer.

"Especially here in Baja where sun means warm. At home the sun can shine beautifully on a day that's minus thirty."

Paul shook his head. "I have no idea how you Canadians do it."

"There's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing. At least that's what we tell ourselves."

"But do you believe it?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Not really. If we did you wouldn't find so many of us here in the south for the winter. It would be simpler and less expensive to buy another sweater."

Paul chuckled. "Well, you know your way around so make yourself at home." He glanced up at the clock on the wall. "Sunset is in about half an hour if you want to catch the show before coming downstairs for dinner. I'll send Arturo to get the rest of your bags. Your car is unlocked?"

"It is. Thank you, Paul. But tonight it will be the sunset, a bath and then bed. I'm exhausted, and I had dinner up the road with my Baja caravan companions."

"Still travelling down with the RVers, are you? I guess we'll see you in the morning then. Rest well."

An arched doorway led to a hallway that doubled as Paul's gallery, its white stuccoed walls displaying pieces in watercolour, oil, acrylic, and pastel. Each fall the hotel was taken over by a group of artists led by their British instructor, a friend of Paul's, and many of the pieces had been gifted by the visiting artists. At the end of the hallway was a large open porthole that looked out to the Sea of Cortez. Sandra stopped for a moment to take in the magnificent view: shimmering water, azure sky, the pale beige sand of the beach. She turned left and walked past doors with ceramic signs reading "Picudos", "Dorado" and "Cabrilla" for some of the fish in the area, and smiled as she arrived at the final door, its indigo sign reading "Pez Vela", Spanish for sailfish. She pushed her card into the slot, turned the handle and entered what would be her home for the next two months. Dropping her bags to the floor, she again closed her eyes to inhale the fragrance of the sea as it blew in through the open French doors. *Heaven.*