

*Seabirds and
Saying
Goodbye*



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Seabirds and Saying Goodbye

A Love on Turtle Beach novella

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Chapter 1

Goldie helped Tom up the stairs, and when he got to their bedroom doorway, he stopped. She asked if he was all right, and he nodded. Goldie suggested he hold on to the doorway while she ran downstairs to get his overnight bag with his prescription in it. While downstairs, she poured a glass of filtered water into her husband's favorite mug, slung his duffle bag over her shoulder, and climbed the stairs, turning back once for his slippers.

When she reached the top of the steps, Goldie saw Tom was crying, something she'd only seen him do once in their forty-five years together. When she asked if he was in pain, he shook his head. "I'm fine," he whispered. She encouraged him to get in bed, take a nap, and "sleep the hospital" off him. After a week's stay, Tom had two choices: hospice or home, and anyone who knew him wasn't surprised when he said home. "It's just that when I think of this bedroom and all the memories I have in here..." His voice trailed off.

"What is it, honey?" Goldie said.

“When I step over the threshold this time, it won’t be to carry you or one of the children, or to sit by the window and read a John Grisham novel. I’m not passing through on my way to the bathroom to shave and start my workday. This time, I’m going into my bedroom for one reason: to die.”

Goldie rested her head on Tom’s shoulder and felt it shudder against her cheek. Realizing the only way either of them was going to endure what was coming was through humor, Goldie said, “Hm, that’s funny. I thought we were going in there to get frisky.” Tom managed a laugh, and it was nothing short of music to Goldie’s ears.

They got Tom situated in bed, and Goldie gave him his pills. There were so many of them that it had become hard to keep track of which pill was for what symptom. Goldie closed the curtains and asked if Tom needed anything else. He didn’t. She whispered that she’d come back in an hour with lunch. Tom pulled the covers up and closed his eyes, not saying anything back.

In the kitchen, Goldie took some meat out of the freezer to thaw for dinner. She made a pitcher of lemonade and thumbed through the mail that had stacked up over the past week. Separating the junk from the important mail such as letters and bills, a red envelope caught her eye. It was a card from her eldest daughter, Lucinda, addressed to Tom. *Probably a Get Well card again*, Goldie thought. They were coming in regularly from the children, friends, and previous guests of The Pink Octopus, the beach cottage rental business Tom and Goldie had owned for decades.

Everyone thought Tom would get well. When he was diagnosed with cancer, his type had a low survival rate, but people always hang onto hope, figuring what else is there? Tom was initially a man on a mission, saying, “I’m going to beat this thing, Goldie. I’m not done loving you.” He started an organic juice diet, walked two miles a day

except during chemotherapy, and watched only upbeat, funny movies. He read online articles Goldie printed out for him about people who survived the worst odds and lived five, ten, or even twenty years cancer-free by employing simple lifestyle changes.

Then, a few days ago, Dr. Michaels, one of Tom and Goldie's oldest friends, told them the surgery wasn't the success they'd hoped it would be. When the chemo didn't work, Dr. Michaels—Morty to the Perry family—thought perhaps trying to go in and cut the tumor out might be the only answer left to consider. Tom had a reaction to the anesthetic and had to be placed in a medically induced coma. When he woke up, days later, Dr. Michaels said that unfortunately, when they went in to excise the tumor, they found some bad news. "How bad?" Tom asked, sitting up in bed.

"The cancer spread, Tom. I'm sorry."

"Spread to where, Morty? Tom asked. "My liver? My spleen? I mean, I read an article about..."

"Tom," Morty said gently, cutting him off mid-sentence, "We've done everything we can. I wish I had better news. I am so sorry."

When Morty left the room, Goldie told Tom she'd be right back. She went into the hall, closed the door behind her, and said, "Morty, I love you because you've been great throughout this nightmare of a situation. You're one of our dearest friends and I consider you and Faye family." He smiled and touched her arm. "But," she said, removing his hand, "I will string you up and flog you if don't go back in there and cut out every inch of tumor from my husband. He is the love of my life, and I cannot lose him. Do you hear me, Morty?"

Morty saw Goldie was starting to cry, and he said he loved her and Tom too, which is why he needed to be frank. Then he said that Tom was "riddled" with cancer, and Goldie bristled at that word. Without blinking or averting his gaze, Morty spoke slowly, and explained that

Tom had weeks at best, but days was more likely. Goldie felt wobbly on her feet, and Morty led her to a private waiting room. She let loose months of tears she'd been holding in to stay strong for Tom. After a few minutes, she looked at the doctor and asked what came next.

Tom's options were to go to a hospice care facility on the mainland or go home because insurance wouldn't cover a longer stay. Morty said the pain medicine would keep Tom comfortable and offered to stop by and visit every few days if she'd welcome that. She nodded and said thank you. Morty stood to leave, and turned back to say, "Goldie, dear? If you want Tom to say goodbye to the kids or if there are loose ends to tie up, please do so with haste." Her mouth dropped, and all she could say was, "Oh, Morty." Then she nodded to let him know she understood, and he left to go see his other patients.

Goldie picked up the phone and dialed her oldest daughter, Lucinda. Lucinda's daughter, Jill, answered, and asked how Pop Pop was doing. Goldie didn't have the heart to tell her granddaughter how grim the situation was, so she brushed off the question and asked about Jill's college graduation ceremony that was a few weeks out. Finally, Jill put Lucinda on the phone and Goldie said, "Baby, Dad's not doing so well."

By the end of the call, Lucinda was on her laptop looking up flights to Turtle Island. Goldie said she had to go make lunch for Tom, but asked Lucinda to please call her sister and brother, who both still lived on the island, only minutes from their parents. "Ben will act tough but follow up with him tomorrow to make sure he's really OK," Goldie said.

"What about Sharon?"

"She'll want to come over and dote on Dad, and he'll hate it. It'll make him feel like a hopeless case, which maybe he is, but still."

"I'll tell her to call before going over, okay, Mom?"

“Okay, thanks. I’ve got to go.”

Goldie hung up, sliced a fresh tomato, and made turkey sandwiches to take upstairs. She sliced an apple and put half on one plate and half on the other. She rounded out the plates with cubed cheddar cheese, knowing that Tom’s meal would go mostly untouched. One of the side effects of his cancer was a loss of appetite. He’d dropped fifty pounds in just under two months, which Goldie hadn’t realized was possible, and might not have believed it if she didn’t live with Tom. She hated to force him to eat, especially knowing it wouldn’t improve the outcome. She carried the tray upstairs and set it down on the nightstand next to Tom’s side of the bed. “Darling,” she whispered. Tom looked at her. He wasn’t sleeping.

She opened the curtains and helped Tom sit up in bed, stuffing extra pillows behind him until he was comfortable. He pointed to the pain pills, and she looked at her watch. She asked if he could hold off a little longer, perhaps take a few bites of sandwich, and he nodded. By the time Tom refused anything more, he’d made it through almost half of the turkey sandwich and one apple slice. “You did good, Tom,” she said, rattling the pill bottle open. “I can give you one now and if it’s not enough, let me know. Maybe I can slip one more in as long as you don’t tell Morty.”

Goldie read a few chapters in Tom’s novel, with him making a joke that she should start on the last page and read backwards, just in case. Goldie wanted so badly to set down the book and ask Tom if he was scared to die. She wanted to ask if he believed in God, and silently berated herself for never clearing that matter up in all their years together.

How had it never come up, she wondered? The little it was mentioned, it certainly seemed like Tom was a believer. She always thought there would be time to iron out details such as whether they each

wanted buried or cremated, if she should continue the business or sell, and whether Goldie should call Tom's brother, Roger, when he died, since they hadn't spoken in almost twenty years.

Instead, she read the book aloud, pausing every so often to give Tom a sip of water or wipe his forehead with a damp washcloth. "Why am I sweating so much?" he asked. "It's not even hot in here."

"It's hot everywhere, honey," Goldie said, patting his shoulder. "We live on a tropical island."

"It must be the medicine. This toxic brew they've prescribed to me, and for what? Who can promise me one more day by taking them?"

"Maybe you need some sea air. We should see if Ben can take you out on the boat tomorrow. I'll pack you a lunch."

"That might be nice. I haven't been on the water in a while. Maybe I'll see our old friend, Hercules. If he sees me looking like the walking dead, maybe he'll grant me one more wish."

Goldie continued reading and felt her stomach twist when one character got a cancer diagnosis. *Of all the books Tom had to be in the middle of right now*, she thought. She didn't know what to hope for as the story went on because if the character was all right, it would remind Tom that he didn't fare so well. If the character died, that would only bring the inevitable to the forefront of Tom's mind, when the book was supposed to be an escape. Goldie cringed, but kept on reading, speeding through the medical jargon.

When Tom dozed off in the chair, Goldie tiptoed downstairs and made herself a cup of tea. Ben let himself in the front door and plopped on the sofa across from her. "Is Dad home yet?" he said in a chipper voice. "I was hoping we could watch the game tonight. I can bring him over some beer and a pizza. Did Morty clear him to eat regular non-hospital food yet?" Ben considered his proposal, then said, "Wait, can he drink on the pain meds from the surgery? Maybe

I should get him near beer. He'll love that!" Ben laughed despite himself, and then noticed his mother wasn't responding.

She set down her teacup and asked if he'd talked to Lucinda yet today. He shook his head and said he'd been out on the water with a couple of guests who were hoping to catch a glimpse of Herc, the legendary giant sea turtle that made the island famous. Pulling his cell phone from his pocket, he said, "Oh, yeah. There's a message from Lucinda. What's up?" Goldie motioned for Ben to listen to the voicemail. He did, and the way his face fell, Goldie knew Lucinda had broken the news about Tom. Although some might say Lucinda took the easy way out leaving the news over a voicemail, Goldie was grateful the Band-Aid had been ripped off.

Ben looked at Goldie, and opened his mouth to speak, but started to cry. Goldie hadn't seen him do that since he smashed a hornet's nest with a baseball bat when he was eight. She went over and sat down beside him. "How long does he have, Mom?" he said, sniffing.

"Days, if even."

Chapter 2

After sending Ben down to the office building next to her home, Goldie climbed the stairs to check on Tom. Ben promised to talk to Sharon, who was filling in at the front desk, in case she hadn't connected with Lucinda yet either. When Goldie saw Tom sleeping, she tried to quietly close the door again, but he awoke with the squeaking hinge he'd never gotten around to fixing. "Do you remember how we met?" he whispered.

Goldie threw her head back and said she was old, but not senile. She said she could undergo a lobotomy and not forget their early days. Tom grinned, and stood up, motioning for the bed. Goldie helped him in and Tom pulled back the covers, inviting her to join him. She climbed in beside him and settled into her spot on his right shoulder. "Prove it," Tom said. "I want to hear you tell the story."

"OK, mister," Goldie said, snuggling in. "It'll take a while, so I hope you're comfortable."

Goldie closed her eyes and felt the warmth of her husband's body against her cheek. She couldn't help but wonder how she'd ever sleep

again once Tom wasn't there next to her. He was dying, and she wasn't nearly ready to let go. There were conversations to be had, memories to be made. She needed Tom to run the business and string the Christmas lights on the roof and get oil changes in the car. They'd never gotten around to cleaning out the garage or updating their wills.

The truth was, she had seen it coming, with the weight loss and hospital scans and scary words whispered by Morty and his colleagues. Still, she did what any wife would do: She hoped for a miracle. Now, she was angry. Angry with the doctors. Angry that Tom smoked for so many years before giving it up. Angry with herself for making bacon for Tom every morning for decades. She closed her eyes and traveled back in time forty-five years.



Gilda picked the diced onions out of her meatloaf and a kindly server named Alvin topped off her coffee. There were a pile of wadded-up napkins surrounding her lunch plate. "Ma'am?" Alvin said quietly. "Is there anyone I can call for you? Anything I can do?" Gilda wiped her nose, took a sip of her coffee and said, "No thanks. There's nothing anyone can do at this point."

The diner was nearly empty, and Gilda motioned for Alvin to sit down in the booth across from her. He looked over at Ernie behind the counter, who nodded his approval. Alvin sat down and started tidying the table, where Gilda had stacked sugar cubes into small towers, and wrote notes on napkins and eaten a bite or two of each of the four desserts she'd ordered over the past two hours. "Alvin," Gilda said, pouring a glob of ketchup on her plate, "what would you do if you were me?"

“Ma’am?”

“Well, you see, all I want to do is to go home and climb in bed and sleep for weeks, or at least until I figure out a plan. The only problem is, I don’t have a home anymore.”

“What happened to your home, Miss?”

“Miss. Isn’t that a gas!”

Gilda pointed to her frilly white gown, which now had a large gravy stain in the shape of Texas under the neckline. She told Alvin she was glad the diner was dead because she knew otherwise, she’d be causing a scene. She said she’d happily change out of the itchy, over-the-top wedding dress if only she had some clothes. When Alvin pointed to the suitcase sitting on the floor next to her, Gilda opened it and pulled out a bathing suit, shorts, sundresses, and sandals. “Won’t do me much good in February in...” She looked around. “Where am I again?” Alvin said Duluth, and Gilda shook her head, not entirely sure what state Duluth was in, but too embarrassed to ask.

Gilda left Arthur at the altar. She felt terrible doing such a thing, but she couldn’t imagine marrying a man who pronounced the word *length*, *lenth* and insisted on creating “the perfect bite” every night at dinner. Meals that stretched into an hour because each time Arthur filled his fork, it had to have the perfect ratio of meat to starch to vegetable. Also, he brushed his teeth with peroxide and baking soda because he was too cheap to buy commercial toothpaste. If all that weren’t enough, Arthur’s last name was Goop. No matter how many times and ways Gilda tried getting her head around it, she just couldn’t imagine spending the rest of her life as Gilda Goop.

When Gilda and Arthur went to his parents’ farm to share the engagement news, Arthur’s father, Whittaker, insisted they build a house on the family’s property and help run the farm. Sylvia silently nodded and handed Gilda a cup of tea. Arthur lit up at the idea, as if

it were completely acceptable for him and Gilda to become farmers and stay in Iowa forever. Later, when Gilda asked Arthur about it, reminding him of their dream to move to California and start a dance studio near the beach, Arthur said, "But, Papa wants to build us a house, Gilda. Can you imagine never having a mortgage payment? Why, we'll be living large!"

"How large can we live on a farm in Iowa?"

"I'm afraid I have to put my foot down on this one, Gilda. You'll see. We'll have a good life. You can still dance. Maybe Inez will let you become an instructor at the studio in town."

Alvin listened intently, and when Gilda took a break to pick at her lime Jell-O, he cleared his throat and asked, "Why did you say yes to marrying a man you didn't love, if you don't mind me asking, ma'am?" Gilda quickly corrected him, saying she did love Arthur, or at least the *idea* of Arthur. She said he was good with money, wanted a house full of children, and always held the door for little old ladies. "He even said my parents could move in with us when they grew old if they needed help to getting around. In a lot of ways, Arthur is a real gem."

"What made you leave him, and on your wedding day?"

"I peeked out and saw the guests sitting in the pews, waiting for the ceremony to begin. I saw my parents and cousins and my brother. My best friends, Annie and Carol, were standing in front of the church as bridesmaids. Everyone was there. Then I looked over to Arthur's side of the aisle and saw his mother and father sitting in the front row. I got the strangest, clearest picture in my mind of Arthur and I turning into Sylvia and Whittaker. Running the farm, never leaving Iowa, eating lasagna every Sunday, having pre-ordained burial plots on the family property. I couldn't do it. I knew I'd rather face whatever unknown is out there waiting for me than to become small...ordinary."

When Alvin stood up and started clearing the table, Gilda sat up straight and nervously adjusted her veil. She asked Alvin if he was kicking her out. He said of course not, but that he had to get back to work. "Stay as long as you like, ma'am," he said, smiling. He cleared all the dirty dishes and napkins from Gilda's table and came back with a hot rag to wipe it down. A few minutes later, he brought her a cup of tea and a notepad and pencil. He told her she could use it to make a list or write a letter or whatever she might need to do to make a new plan for herself.

Alvin tended to a few tables of people who had shuffled into the diner for an early dinner, and Gilda wrote in large letters at the top of a page, "How to Start Over When You're Broke and Alone."

Chapter 3

When Alvin finished his shift, he sat back down in the booth across from Gilda. She read her list to him, which included things such as “Find new living arrangements,” and “No matter what, do not call your parents.” Alvin sighed and looked dreamily at the ceiling. He said when he was younger, he wanted to be a firefighter. When Gilda asked what stopped him, he said he’d been drafted into the Army and by the time the war was over, he had a steel plate in his head. “They wouldn’t take me down at the station,” he said, tapping on his temple. “Still, I’m just glad I made it back alive. That’s more than half my platoon can say.”

After a few minutes, a pretty girl came to the booth and smiled at Gilda. She looked at Alvin, who introduced the girl—Patsy—to Gilda. Patsy was Alvin’s sister, and she brought a small grocery store bag with a couple of outfits in it for Gilda, along with a winter coat. When Gilda tried to resist, Patsy said, “Are you kidding? Now I have an excuse to go shopping!”

Gilda smiled, thanked Patsy and Alvin, and said goodbye as they headed out. On his way to the front door, Alvin turned back and said, "It never hurts to check our bulletin board for job opportunities and housing in case you're thinking of sticking around Duluth." Gilda smiled, nodded, and Alvin added, "For the record? I've only known you a few hours, but if you don't mind me saying, ma'am, you could never wind up ordinary."

Gilda waved goodbye and walked over to a corkboard in the front corner of the diner, where Alvin had pointed on his way out the door. She hadn't noticed it on her way in, but then again, she'd been crying too hard to see much of anything. She saw pieces of paper and notecards advertising things such as "free puppies," used vehicles, and "farm-fresh eggs." One sign caught her eye because it was on a napkin and stuck to the center of the board. It was an advertisement for a live-in housekeeper looking for a suntan. "Looking for a suntan?" she whispered, laughing. "What in the world?"

She removed the pushpin and put the napkin in her purse. She went to the ladies' room and changed into a floral top and jeans that fit as well as if she'd pulled them from her own closet. She stuffed her wedding dress in the trash can and fluffed her hair in the smudged mirror. "You'll get through this," she said to her reflection. "You will." She went to the counter and squared away her bill with the owner, who charged her less than half of what she owed. She asked if he knew a place where she could sleep for the night, and he motioned for the front door. "Across the street, down one block, and turn right," he said. "Colleen's Boarding House. Tell her Ernie sent you."

Sliding into the long brown coat Patsy had given her, Gilda stood tall and exited the diner. She did as Ernie said and crossed the street, walked a block, and turned to find Colleen's. It was an unassuming white house with a sign in the yard. It looked like temporary housing,

which was exactly what Gilda was looking for. Beyond that night, she had no idea what to expect, but for the moment, a bed would do just fine. She walked up the front steps, knocked on the front door, and when a plump woman with kind eyes answered, she said, “Hello, ma’am. My name is Gilda. Do you have a room I can stay in for a night, maybe two?”

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