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CHEVY
STEVENS

NEVER

LET

YOU

A Novel

GO

NEVER LET
YOU GO

ALSO BY CHEVY STEVENS

Those Girls

That Night

Always Watching

Never Knowing

Still Missing

NEVER
LET YOU
GO

CHEVY STEVENS

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Carla, who never gives up

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The towns of Lions Lake and Dogwood Bay are fictional.
All other locations are real.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

LINDSEY

NOVEMBER 2005

I didn't have long. He was waiting out by the pool—and he'd be counting every minute. I splashed cold water on my face, let the rivulets run down my neck and onto my shirt. I stared into the mirror. Tried to remember how to arrange my lips so I didn't look so scared, softened the muscles around my eyes, rubbed at the smeared mascara. It didn't matter how many ways I told him I hadn't been flirting with that man, I might as well have been shouting into the ocean.

The concrete floor of the bathroom was covered with sand and bits of paper that stuck to my flip-flops. Beside me a little girl struggled with her tap. I reached over and turned it on for her, then moved to the side, avoiding the curious look from her mother as she exited a stall.

They walked out hand in hand, the little girl chatting about Santa—would he find them at the resort? Christmas was a month away. I thought of Sophie with a sharp ache in my chest. Each day she added something new to her list. I had one thing on my wish list, just one.

This vacation was supposed to be an early Christmas gift from Andrew, but that was an excuse. He knew he'd gone too far last time. I came up with reasons we couldn't go to Mexico, but he'd overridden every one and booked a room at the resort where we stayed on our honeymoon. Our suite was even bigger this time, the view panoramic. As though white sand and sparkling turquoise water could make up for everything.

I had been careful to wear the pink one-piece when we went down to the beach that morning, layered with my tunic cover-up, the one with the high neckline and hem almost to my knees. Then I put on my straw hat and large sunglasses. As we left the room, he smiled his approval, drew me close for a kiss. I tensed, but I couldn't smell any alcohol on his breath or taste it on his lips. I wanted to pull away, but he had to end the kiss first.

We set up on the beach under one of the grass umbrellas for the next couple of hours as Sophie played in the sand. Andrew's hand held mine across our chairs, his thumb stroking lazy circles. A woman walked past and I caught her giving Andrew an admiring look. He was handsome in his white shorts, his stomach muscles clearly defined, his skin bronzed after only a few days in the sun, but none of this had any effect on me anymore. I was careful not to look around, but I imagined how we must seem to others. Just another happy couple with their child.

I pretended to doze, but I was watching Sophie behind my glasses. She was building an elaborate sand castle with turrets and a moat, and using a stick to draw designs in the side, where she carefully placed shells. She'd be seven in January, was already leaving the little girl behind, her limbs thinning out, her pale blond hair darkening to rich honey like her father's.

She picked up her pail and walked back to us. "I'm hungry, Mommy."

We flagged down the waiter, who'd been bringing Andrew Coronas all morning. "Una cerveza, por favor," Andrew would say, while I sipped on a lime margarita, and tried to ignore the

growing knot in my stomach. We put in our order, chicken salad for me, burger and fries for them. Our waiter was handsome, with black hair and eyes, white teeth that flashed in quick smiles, and a cheeky expression. I avoided looking at him, but then I made the mistake. When I passed him my empty glass, his fingers lingered a moment against mine. It was an accident. He'd been distracted by some noise behind us, but I knew it wouldn't matter. Our hands had touched.

The waiter set down a fresh margarita in front of me and walked away. Andrew was wearing sunglasses, but I could still see his angry expression, the pinched look around his mouth, and my thoughts careened and slid around, trying to find purchase. I had to distract him.

I motioned to the beach, the palm trees. "The scenery is gorgeous."

"Yes, you looked like you were appreciating it."

"It's so relaxing." I molded my face into a pleasant smile. As if I didn't know what he was getting at. As if we hadn't been down this road so many times before.

Sophie, perched on the end of my beach chair with her towel wrapped around her waist, was watching our faces, her green eyes worried. She twirled a strand of wet hair around her finger. Ever since she was a baby, she'd twirl her hair when she was tired or anxious.

"Why don't you go collect more shells, sweetie?" I said. "They look beautiful on the turrets. I'll wave when lunch gets here." She got up, grabbed her blow-up dolphin, and walked back to the beach but looked over her shoulder at me a couple of times. I kept smiling.

"You must think I'm stupid," Andrew said when she was out of earshot.

"Of course not."

He focused back on his book, turning each page with a jerk. My breath was fast and tight in my throat. I took a sip of my

drink, but the lime was no longer refreshing, the acid curling in my stomach. I rubbed at my breastbone, but it didn't ease the pressure.

Our meals arrived and the waiter asked if he could get us anything else, but Andrew wasn't speaking to him and I was forced to answer for both of us while Andrew stared at me. I could feel his rage from across the chairs, hear the rant he was rehearsing.

Sophie was now making her way back. I leaned closer to Andrew. "Please don't do this. Please don't turn this into something. He touched my hand by *accident*."

"I saw the way you looked at him, Lindsey."

"No, you *didn't*." This was when I should've been reassuring him, telling him he was my one and only, but the margarita had made me brave. It made me stupid.

"You're imagining things," I said.

It was as though his entire face broke apart and then rearranged itself into someone else. The real Andrew. The man no one saw except me.

Sophie ran up to us, sat beside me on the beach chair. Her skin was cold and wet against mine. She reached for a french fry. "Did you see all my shells, Mommy?"

"Yes, baby." I glanced at her castle. "They're perfect."

Andrew dumped ketchup onto his plate, smeared a french fry around. "Eat your lunch, darling."

"I just need to go and wash my hands." I could feel Andrew watching me all the way to the restrooms. I kept my head down and didn't look at anyone.

I threw my paper towel into the garbage, slid my sunglasses on. I had to get back to the beach. Sophie would want to swim again and I didn't want Andrew to let her when she'd just eaten. I

thought of the Coronas he'd had. How many? I didn't even know. I used to keep count.

They weren't on the beach chairs. My salad was still on the side table, the lettuce wilting in the heat. My drink was empty. Andrew's burger and fries were gone, Sophie's half eaten. I looked around. They weren't at her sand castle. Maybe they went back to our room? I walked closer to Sophie's sand castle. Her towel was spread on the other side, her lime-green plastic sandals kicked off.

Her dolphin float was missing.

I took a few steps into the water, my hand covering my eyes. The waves rose and fell, an undulating mass of blue. Swimmers bobbed up and down. I squinted, tried to focus on their faces. Where was she? Where was Andrew? I spun around and scanned the people on the beach, the throngs of resort guests, clusters of kids running and chasing waves. I turned back and gazed out over the water again, looking for Sophie's small head, her red bathing suit.

Then I saw her blow-up dolphin moving up and down in the waves—with no one on it. I walked through the water as fast as I could, the current tugging against my legs, my feet sinking into the soft sand. When I was in deeper water I swam hard strokes to the toy and latched on. They had to be out there. Sophie never let that dolphin out of her sight.

I couldn't see her bright pink snorkel, but there were so many people in the water. I thought again of the food she had eaten, the beers Andrew had drunk. He was a strong swimmer, but Sophie was still learning, and tired easily. I plunged my head under the water.

I saw legs coming closer—masculine legs. I rose to the surface sucking in the air in big gasps. An older man a few feet away took his snorkel out of his mouth.

"You okay?" he yelled.

"I can't find my daughter!" More people were swimming

over. *What's she wearing? Did you see her go under? Someone get the lifeguard!*

I was treading water, my torso supported by the dolphin. "I didn't see her go in. She's only six. She's wearing a red bathing suit." A speedboat roared past and fresh waves sent us all bobbing up and down, salt splashing in my face. The horizon appeared and disappeared.

Someone from the resort on a Jet Ski radioed in her description. People were diving down, then rising to the surface with wet hair and foggy goggles.

None of them found her. I kept sticking my head under the water, but all I saw now were pale thrashing legs that stirred up the sand and made the water murky. I popped back up, looked out over the breakwater. Could they have been swept out to sea?

One of the resort boats was circling outside the roped-off swimming area. The staff in their white shirts and orange shorts, binoculars pressed to their eyes, searched the horizon. I waited for a yell, something, but the beach had gone curiously silent. People stood at the shore.

I didn't know how long I'd been in the water. My teeth were chattering and I was frantic, confused by all the people speaking to me. I explained that she was with my husband, that he could be missing too. The lifeguard wanted me to return to shore, tugged at my arm until I finally went with him. We swam to the beach and I lurched onto the sand, still clutching the dolphin float. My cover-up was clinging to my skin, wrapping around my thighs. My legs gave out and I collapsed onto my knees. The sun beat down on me, blinded my eyes as I stared out at the water.

Beside me the lifeguard urged me to drink water from a plastic bottle, then talked into his radio, Spanish phrases I couldn't understand. Jet Skis searched the water.

I felt something, an awareness that made me turn my head and look down the beach. It was them, walking toward us. Sophie in her red bathing suit with the white polka dots that we'd picked out together. Andrew, his long muscular legs taking those familiar loping steps. They were clutching drinks. Sophie looked like she was wondering what all the fuss was about.

I jumped to my feet, sprinted to them, almost losing my balance in the soft sand, but I was unstoppable. I lifted Sophie into my arms. I was crying into her neck.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

"What's going on, Lindsey?"

The lifeguard came over. "Is this your daughter, senora?"

"Yes, yes!" I lowered her down, pressed my hands to the sides of her face, and kissed her cheeks, her lips, her suntan-lotion-scented nose, her hair that had dried into salty ropes.

Andrew was talking with the lifeguard. "I'm sorry my wife put you all through this. She has an overactive imagination." He smiled and made little circles by his head.

The lifeguard gave him a confused smile, dropped a hand onto my shoulder, and peered into my face. "Drink some more water, senora. The sun, it's very hot, sí?"

He left us alone. The crowd was dispersing, but I could feel their judgment, the whispers. I didn't care. I had Sophie. She was solid and real and standing in front of me.

"I was so scared," I told her. "I saw your dolphin in the water."

"Daddy and I were playing and it floated away. He said we could get it later."

Andrew was staring out at the water. I tried to read his expression but he was wearing sunglasses. How angry was he that I'd made a fuss?

"It just kept floating away," he said. "Thought we might never see it again." Then he grabbed Sophie's hand. "Come on. Let's get out of the sun."

We were sitting under the umbrella. I was still shaking, though the sun was aiming directly at us and I'd wrapped a towel around myself—I'd noticed Andrew glancing at my wet cover-up clinging to my breasts and thighs. Sophie was sitting near me, her hand in mine. She kept giving me little pats. "I'm okay, Mommy. I'm okay. I'm sorry you got scared."

Andrew was watching me. I could feel his gaze burning into the side of my face. I wanted to ignore him, but I knew he was trying to get me to look at him. I turned. There was a look in his eye, something mean. Something smug.

"That was embarrassing," he said.

"Why didn't you wait for me?"

"You were taking too long." He shrugged.

"You did it on purpose. You were trying to scare me."

"Don't be silly," he said, rising to his feet. "You did that to yourself." He held his hand out for Sophie. "Come on, sweetie. I'll help you build another sand castle."

I watched them walk away. Sophie looked over her shoulder at me, her little face concerned. I smiled reassuringly. The life-guard came over. "Is everything okay now, senora?"

"Yes, yes, it's fine." I didn't want him to linger. He turned away and I saw something in his face. Pity? Or did he think I was just a stupid blond woman who overreacted? I remembered how I had thrashed around in the water, how desperate I'd felt. How had I become this way? How had I turned into this woman who couldn't go to the bathroom without being afraid?

Andrew was filling a pail with sand. Sophie and he had the same determined expression. He felt me watching, gave a small wave and a friendly smile.

You're imagining things. That's what I'd told him, and then he made me pay.

But he hadn't just wanted me to be scared. He wanted me to

know he could take her from me. In the blink of an eye. One day I might be in the bathroom, or maybe I'd step outside for a moment, or go to the store, and they'd be gone. I would never see her again.

I had to leave him when we got home. There was no more time to plan. No matter what it took, no matter how risky it was, I had to get Sophie away from him.

I slowly lifted my hand, gave my palm a kiss, and blew it in his direction.