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## Rocky Waters: Exploring the Intersections of Romance and Travel

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About 60,000 words

# ROCKY WATERS:

EXPLORING THE INTERSECTIONS OF ROMANCE AND TRAVEL

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## *Author's Note*

Despite being a senior business student at Bowling Green State University with a focus on Marketing, I opted to write this romance fiction novel for my Honors Project. The primary goal was to challenge myself. There is a high level of versatility required to conquer a task completely outside one's area of expertise, but I was eager to enhance a set of skills that I am not intensely focusing on in the classroom. I have taken over 90 credit hours' worth of business-related courses that have taught me the specifics of business operations, strategies, and communications styles. Therefore, initiating a creative project was a daunting task. However, by refining this contrasting skillset, I hoped to become a much better-rounded writer, student, and individual.

In addition to stepping outside my comfort zone, I possess an enormous love for the romance genre. Reading has always been a hobby of mine, and the romance genre is my go-to. Nicholas Sparks, John Green, and Sarah MacLean fill my shelves; their stories inspired me to see how well I could write my own. My intention was to write in a similar style to these well-known writers, most of which mirrors contemporary romance. A few key aspects of this subgenre include realistic scenarios and outcomes, modern language, and a general focus on the emotional development of a relationship. This helped me establish exactly how I would come at this process.

My interest in international studies is another reason why I chose this specific route for my Honors Project. After entering college as an undecided business major, I quickly chose International Business as one of my specializations. This derived from my curiosity about the world, other cultures, and how they did business with one another. I furthered my interest in international studies when I traveled abroad with the BGSU Marketing Department. In January of 2019, I was one of twelve marketing students who went to Austria and the Czech Republic to

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experience life in these countries and incorporate their business practices into our studies. This solidified my fondness for researching and writing about other nationalities, serving as one of the main sources of inspiration for my novel.

The final reason I pursued this project is because of an experience I had during the summer of 2018. My grandmother took me on a Mediterranean cruise, similar to the one in the story, and the locations, cultures, and people I encountered served as the perfect inspiration for a fictional narrative. I visited Greece, Italy, and Croatia over the course of ten days. I was also able to make several friends from other countries onboard the cruise ship while also learning about the cultures of people off board the ship through excursions and tours. Traveling throughout the Greek isles ultimately sparked an internal love for traveling, and I hoped to have my protagonist experience a similar life-changing journey.

While writing this story, I was faced with several obstacles. Primarily, this novel was written within one semester which is the equivalent of about five months. This equated to roughly 5,000 words per week. This is a high quantity to complete on a weekly basis, along with revisions and weekly meetings with faculty advisors. Similarly, I completed this project while being a full-time student, holding a part-time job, and maintaining a social life with friends and family. Hence, my workload was consistently high which occasionally hindered the amount of focus that I was able to put into this project.

Despite these challenges, I was able to successfully complete a 60,000-word manuscript that I am immensely proud of. This piece tells an entertaining story while putting an original spin on traditional romance by incorporating travel and international aspects of love. I also consistently completed revisions. The combination of writing and revising allowed me to further develop the ability to multitask effectively. Likewise, my time management skills were greatly enhanced.

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Balancing a heavy workload was not easy, but it forced me to prioritize what was most important, concentrate on the correct tasks, and get everything done on or ahead of schedule. One method that worked for me was creating a physical schedule and crossing off tasks as they were completed. This is an effective strategy that I discovered throughout the course of completing this project that will benefit me in many other aspects of my life.

Another benefit that I have gained from completing this project is the confidence to do anything I set my mind to, regardless of how comfortable I feel with it. As stated, I am a marketing major at BGSU. Several business majors in the Honors College opt to complete a business-related project because of this. Yet, I was determined to produce a creative piece that I would likely never have the opportunity to do in the future. By completing this novel, I have expanded upon my versatility and ability to succeed in more areas than strictly my field of study. Now that I have finished, I feel exceedingly confident to step out of my comfort zone. Although it may not always be easy, the rewards are worth the risk.

Lastly, I am pleased with the opportunities that this project has created for me. Even though I am happy with the current manuscript, I will always have the opportunity to come back and revise or expand upon the story. In addition, I hope to self-publish in the future. When beginning this project, I had no intentions of anyone outside my university reading my novel. I figured that this would be a personal piece I could keep to myself. However, after exerting an immense amount of hard work and receiving crucial feedback, I am proud of the story that I have constructed. I am eager to have others read this novel, and becoming a published author is an amazing achievement that I never anticipated as a realistic possibility. I am eternally grateful to have selected and completed this project as a part of my Honors curriculum at BGSU.

## Takeoff

Summer: the annual pinnacle of euphoria. Dozens of this season's trademarks cooperatively embed a romantic impression on the planet. Balmy weather perfects the art of darkening skin, brightening hair, and widening smiles. Flowers bloom in full effect from every plant. Crystalline skies abide late into warm evenings spent socializing with lovers, family, and unfamiliar faces soon to be close friends. Founded on excessive hours of relaxation, day drinking, and unpunctual sleep schedules, summer is the sheer liberation from reality. A time that could opt to stand still forever without receiving a single complaint. Summer: a season of fun.

Fuck that misconception.

The past month has amounted to one common theme: boredom. Ohio's brief warm period elects for downpours and overcast instead of its anticipated sunshine. Simple affairs such as a jog through the neighborhood or a therapeutic, music-blaring car ride prove either impossible or stupidly unfulfilling. All conceivable activities require an effort not worth the accompanied hassle. Loneliness also minimizes the feasible alternatives. There is a limited amount of entertainment tailored towards a daughter and her parents- not enough local trivia nights in the world. Consequently, Netflix has become my sole companion with my bed functioning as our designated hookup spot. This intimacy has surfaced a newfound binging ability along with unprecedented lethargy.

I force my eyes open enough to reveal my panic-stricken mom shoving miscellaneous articles of clothing and toiletries into a carry-on bag. She throws in any item possessing the slightest possibility of being useful, ensuring that every inch of unoccupied space in the worn-out backpack gets put to use. She mumbles to herself and appears oblivious of my recent awakening from the

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dead. My dad stands a safe distance away, virtually in the hall, rattling off the essential documents I need for this trip that appear hot off the printer. His attention rapidly bolts from a pre-departure checklist to the stack of papers in his left hand.

My parents sending me to Europe for a few weeks is the equivalent of an average family sending a kid off to boarding school, or the military. This includes daily reminders of proper behavior, soppy goodbyes as if I may never return, and an incessant panic regarding packing all necessities. The only time the three of us have been separated was for my aunt's funeral in the spring. They traveled to Florida for a week to handle the arrangements but cast me to the neighbors in a disheartening attempt to limit my absenteeism days away from graduation. Nevertheless, my parents and I have always been our own tight-wound pack. Therefore, any separation comes with an overdose of emotions. Their sentiments leading up to this trip, however, have exuded more than the expected sadness; anxiety stands at the forefront.

My biggest theory for their apprehension centers about the odd pairing of people on this endeavor: my grandma and me. We get along fine but rarely converse outside holiday dinners or her occasional (forced) appearance at a soccer game. There is no animosity or resentment present, but also no mushy-gushy attachment.

Another probable reason my parents are acting so fanatical is due to them witnessing my life go to shit recently, beginning with high school graduation. I proudly left my mark on the institution during my time there: captain of our state-winning soccer team, senior homecoming queen, and, to many people's surprise, salutatorian of our sizable graduating class. I locked in the junior quarterback during sophomore year and we resided together for the next three. By no means had our relationship been a fairytale but having someone by my side seemed safer than the inevitable alternative.

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I also possessed my group of—eight—girls that I was inseparable from. We established a pre-college sorority in seventh grade and remained content without expanding or reducing our quantity. Each year functioned more as a notch in the security of our friendship rather than a yearly recruitment process. Traveling in a fixed herd became as natural as breathing in and out. From rowdy football games to the few house parties that did not get busted, high school provided a lot more than expected. But now, that era of my life seems like centuries ago.

At the commencement of summer, I caught my boyfriend in a repulsive web of lies. Our attempt to remain loyal while he was in college and I was still in high school resulted in me focusing more heavily on my studies and him exponentially increasing his body count. My heart shattered at the realization that he had been unfaithful, and our termination cast myself into an isolation from the social world I considered second nature.

My girls also slowly began to see little need for my existence without him accompanying me to group hangouts; I no longer functioned as their gateway to the jocks at our school. They turned their attention towards newer targets, and I became the sole outsider to this shared eagerness surrounding the male species. Similarly, the mutual friends that my boyfriend and I accumulated throughout the years all determined that it was safer to choose no sides rather than one over the other, leaving neither of us with their support. These events transformed my rare alone time into an everyday occurrence.

And as if this downward spiral was not detrimental enough, my grandpa passing away placed the ultimate cherry on top. When I heard about the stroke that he experienced on his and my grandma's annual trip to Prague, an avalanche of memories flooded my system. The brand-new Audi that he wrapped with a red bow on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. His encouraging smile standing at the finish line of the first 5K I ever ran. Him taking me fishing and teaching me how to hook the worm

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properly, refusing to yell even in the most frustrating scenarios. A smile filled my face as these memories circulated my thoughts and I learned he became the angel I viewed him as.

He always functioned more as a best friend than a grandparent to my cousins and me. Therefore, his sudden absence sucks ass, far greater than any high school drama or douchebag scandal. Considering the excessive number of lost loved ones, my heart feels permanently broken with a few flimsy pieces of masking tape struggling to keep it together. Nothing sounds appealing, especially packing up my life and pretending to enjoy a vacation that my grandma is dropping a small fortune on.

“Okay girls, we need to get on the road soon” my dad warns us about the ticking time to departure as more of a flight attendant than a parent.

I reluctantly roll out of bed, throw on a pair of leggings with a cropped hoodie, and squeeze my dog a little too hard before initiating our parade out the door to my grandma’s across town. My mind refuses to operate before the sun has risen which means my eyes will remain closed and my conversing abilities will deactivate this car ride. I am thankfully asleep before leaving the neighborhood, only to awaken as the car chugs up my grandma’s driveway moments later.

Above us, the presumptuous gray clouds begin their cast while the sun still refuses to show any glimpse of itself to the world. Darkness dominates the sky which forecasts surefire precipitation for the afternoon- this provoking everyday occurrence has forced my pre-purchased summer garments to linger in the shadows of my closet. Through the backseat window, I notice that my grandma is preparing for the cool temperatures as well. She stands covered head to toe in an identical blue tone as the luggage beside her. Blonde curls poke out of the visor atop her head; its purpose proves completely negligible underneath the gloomy heavens this morning. She also

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showcases a full face of makeup, refusing to enter any public vicinity without pink across her lips and blue above her eyes.

We pile out of the minivan where many “hi” and “you ready?” phrases are briefly exchanged.

“You two have fun and be good, Grace,” my mom says with an obvious emphasis on the word good.

“Alright, mom.” I give each parent an abrupt side hug. “I’ll see you guys in a few weeks.”

My dad loads the mound of luggage into my grandma’s Buick and hits me with a, “Stay safe, kiddo” before following my mom’s gradual footsteps back into the van. They look towards me as if a photographic memory is cementing my image into their brains, and this functions as my cue to slip out of their line of vision.

My grandma navigates to the driver’s seat at a sloth’s pace and wears a similar expression of indifference as mine. Since the moment us grandkids started popping out, our grandparents made it their obligation to expose us to their intense love of traveling; bank accounts were created the day of our births to be spent on an elaborate vacation as a graduation present. My two elder cousins accompanied them to both Spain and Iceland in recent years, each returning with hours’ worth of stories and mementos. However, my exotic getaway is the first to ensue since my grandpa’s death. No one was certain whether my grandma would continue their tradition singly, including her, but my parents’ evident hints that it would be a beneficial opportunity to alleviate the grief convinced her to proceed with it.

When pressured to select a country last month, I arbitrarily picked Greece. I also petitioned wildly for my parents to convoy, but my mom’s seasickness and the lack of available funds eliminated such wishful thinking. Now, as execution arises, my grandma and I both appear

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uncertain of how to proceed. I cannot remember the last time she and I were forced to be alone together. Not sure that it has ever occurred.

This vehicle wreaks with an indescribable odor that overcomes me the moment she locks the doors. It will be a while before crossing the border into Michigan, so I close my eyes and force sleep instead of an awkward, unwanted conversation. With the smell still burning my nostrils, unnecessary AC blowing directly towards my face, and raindrops beginning to bounce against the windshield, I whisper a quick prayer for facile sleep. Hours later, her light touch taps my shoulder to cease a highly unexpected nap. Through the foggy haze my vision perceives, planes fly in various directions above our heads. The loud roar of their engines immediately awakes my eardrums, forcing me to un-pop the static that shoots from one side of my skull to the other.

“Unload our things while I call your mother” she passive aggressively orders.

Stepping out of the car and ignoring her crude tone, I feel underwhelmed from my high expectations of an airport. In tv shows and movies, they get portrayed as a tunnel of excitement full of new beginnings and heart-filled arrivals: a virtual gateway to paradise. But this is a pain in the ass. We park two miles away from the designated check-in area and walk at my grandma’s pace for at least half an hour. Once inside, the interior reveals a mix of individuals traveling with her headspace versus mine- chaotically racing to board the plane at supersonic speed versus scanning for the quickest escape route back home. I momentarily debate ordering an Uber, reluctantly decide against it, and sneak into the poorly lit bathroom nearby.

I conceal the developed bags underneath my bottom lashes before returning to find my grandma harassing an innocent woman behind a desk.

“Ma’am I’m sorry. There’s nothing we can do. Your plane is currently still in Denver” the worker patiently describes to my grandma.

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“What are we supposed to do for five hours?” She always assumes such backhanded questions will receive legitimate responses.

“You’re welcome to-”

“Come on” my grandma interrupts with her refusal to accept that a plane cannot transport from Denver to Detroit in an instant. She expresses an Oscar-worthy abundance of nonverbal attitude as she drags us away from the smiling operator.

Security equates to an even higher degree of obnoxious behavior. I stroll through the machines beep free but hear an alarm sound shortly after I am through. A guard points to my grandma’s wrist, decorated in bracelets from dozens of past vacations, and she fails to understand that they must be temporarily removed to get through. How does a regular traveler not have this process mastered by retirement age? I ask to help her and expedite this process, but the metal of her jewelry slaps the bottom of a bin that she throws them in before I have the chance to intervene. She shuffles through the scanner in her socks and retrieves the jewelry while shooting the guard a death threat with her eyes. My watch reminds me that it is only six in the morning.

She suggests we find something to do since our flight’s departure has been postponed until noon. With numerous stores and gift shops available, shopping is the obvious choice. However, that requires an energy level that I have recently abandoned and provides too many opportunities for my grandma to insert her critiques. As a compromise, I point out a decent-looking restaurant a few feet ahead. We get situated into a booth and place heavy stares on our menus to avoid uncomfortable eye contact.

My mind scrambles for a talking point or any surface level commonalities, but it comes up blank. Several lengthy minutes pass while we sit without words. Her focus appears more centered

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around the revolting appetizers than the awkwardness developing in the air, but I grow desperate for an escape from the silence.

“Have you ever tried pretzel bites? They’re really good.”

Her eyes remain down as she replies, “No.”

A shot and a miss at igniting rapport; complete airball, actually. The only small talk that I can think to generate involves what items to order. Besides the honey glazed ham that she cooks on Christmas day and the Turkey that my mom purchases on Thanksgiving, I cannot recall any foods she particularly enjoys.

“What about buffalo chicken dip?”

“No,” she replicates her previous answer. “We will get two side salads. They’ll serve lunch on the plane. No need to buy much here.”

My effort to alleviate our tension is ceased as she orders the needless salads and pulls out a magazine to skim for the remainder of our meal. I, alternatively, browse various social media sites to pass time. Soon as the salads arrive, they represent our only stray from these individual tasks, and I force mine down embarrassingly quick while my grandma nibbles on each piece of lettuce for a ridiculous length of time.

A few hours later, people sit and wander throughout every inch of the boarding gate. A great variety of families, loners, and mindless kids impatiently await the attendant’s instructions until we enter the gateway to a very cumbersome plane. Spacious walkways lay bounded by luxurious seats linked in groups of fives and threes covered by a curved ceiling overhead. The mentally preparing flight attendants hand us a variety of articles for the extensive flight: food and beverage menus, blankets, pillows, headphones, and eye masks.

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Once locating our designated zone and getting shoved into a middle seat, we sit uncomfortably quiet for a minute or so as the plane initiates its takeoff.

“So, how much of a time change will we be in?” I ask, needing an interruption to the quietness.

“Well, we will be in Italy for a couple nights. They are six hours ahead of us. Once we get on the cruise ship, we will be seven hours ahead.” She seems proud to rattle off these facts.

“Will there be WIFI? My mom told me to send her pictures whenever I can.”

Before I left, my mom begged me to give her updates throughout the trip. She seemed unsure how to cope with the lack of accessibility to one another. I promised I would but am also prepared to blame my failure to do so on the lack of service.

My grandma explains that a few locations during excursions might offer free internet, but overall, our phones will primarily be cameras and clocks; she seems adamant that I will not need it at all. She still possesses a slide-out, dinosaur looking device, so I am not sure if she speculated at what WIFI means or if she recently became informed. She is right, though. I don't have any reason for a phone.

“Are there things planned for us to do, or are we pretty much on our own?”

She breathes loudly. “I've arranged things in each city. Don't worry about that.”

Her inability to offer the slightest hint at what our itinerary embodies sends irritation swimming throughout my veins. My solitary summer has involved seldom wavering in activities, company, or surroundings. The lack of destinations to arrive at or individuals to please introduced a contentedness to remain on an independent schedule according to personal desires. Traveling overseas provides the exact opposite of this customary self-reliance. I feel overwhelmingly uninformed regarding what lies ahead. The odds are slim that anything my grandma has prepared will appeal to a teenage girl.

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I mess around with her TV screen to select a movie after numerous grievances concerning modern technology. *Fifty Shades of Grey* tempts me to press play and spark a reaction, but I end up choosing a much less provocative sci-fi movie. Before she can hound me to complete more tasks, I swallow the Ambien that my mom packed in case of flight anxiety, recline my seat back the full two inches allotted, and rest my head onto the book-size pillow. As the pilot explains flight details in two contrasting languages and my grandma prematurely demands water, I force my eyes shut for the third time this morning.

Talking solely to her on this trip is already agonizing. We have survived nearly a quarter of a day, and I regret not ordering the Uber.