CLEAN GETAWAY

By Nic Stone

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1: QUITE A WAYS TO GO

It might sound silly, but to William "Scoob" Lamar, the Welcome to Alabama the Beautiful sign looks . . . well, *beautiful*. Not as beautiful as his best friend Shenice Lockwood in her yellow sun-dress, but beautiful enough to make Scoob tip his head back, close his eyes, and sigh into the breeze blowing through the open passenger-side window of G'ma's camper van.

Exhale Dad's lockdown. Inhale the sweet fragrance of freedom. Which smells like pine mixed with a little bit of car exhaust.

"You all right over there, Scoob-a-doob?" G'ma says from the driver's seat. She's propped up on the check-covered foam pillow she uses to see over the steering wheel, pale,

polka-dotted little hands perfectly positioned at ten and two. She's only four feet, eleven inches tall, G'ma is.

Hearing his *full* nickname makes Scoob cringe. G'ma gave it to him when he was five years old and obsessed with an old cartoon he used to watch at her house about a dog who liked to solve mysteries. G'ma thought it was *just too adorable*! that he couldn't pronounce *Scooby-Doo*. And because Shenice was G'ma's neighbor, she picked up on the nickname and started using it at school. So it stuck.

Well, the *Scoob* part did. Which is fine. Kinda cool, even.

Scoob-a-doob, though?

"G'ma," he says, "you mind if we stick to Scoob? The rest is a little . . . babyish. No offense," he adds.

"Oh, none taken!" G'ma says. "My apologies, Mr. Scoob."

"I mean . . . you can drop the mister, too," Scoob goes on.

This makes G'ma laugh.

Which makes Scoob smile. He'd never tell anybody, but there's really no sound in the world he loves more than his grandmother's barking laughter. Dad's not a fan; says it "grates" on him because it's the one reminder of G'ma's past smoking days "and potential future lung cancer," but it reminds Scoob of elementary school days playing card games she taught him that he wasn't supposed to know the rules for—like Texas Hold'em and Blackjack. Even now, it blows Scoob's mind that a harsh, booming sound like that could come out of a person as little as G'ma.

"I mean it, though," she says. "You feeling all right? I'm not driving too fast, am I?" She kicks him a wrinkly wink.

Now Scoob's the one laughing. He looks up from the brand-new road map she handed him once they were both settled and seat-belted: according to the speed meter, the brand-new camper van he and G'ma are in has a max speed of 120 miles per hour, but G'ma has yet to push the needle to 60. "Definitely not too fast, G'ma. Though I do wonder if there's a minimum-speed-limit law you're breaking."

"Oh you hush," she says. "Speaking of which, you never said if you liked my new sweet ride or not. That's what you kids call it these days, right? A sweet ride?" She says it in a way that makes her sound like a smarmy used-car salesman with oil-slicked hair.

Scoob chuckles and shakes his head. Then he peeks over his shoulder into the back.

Truthfully, when G'ma popped up out of the blue and asked if Scoob wanted to "go on a little adventure," he was too excited at the thought of a loophole in his punishment to give much thought to anything else, their destination included. Especially when she said he'd "probably miss a couple days of school." (Bonus!) He finished item three— *empty the dishwasher*—on the to-do list Dad left for him on the kitchen whiteboard every day, and grabbed his suitcase. Then, after scribbling Dad a quick note about being with G'ma "for the night," Scoob ran right out of the house as fast as his off-brand-trainer-clad feet would carry him. Even left his phone at home.

Largely so Dad can't call him, but he won't tell G'ma that.

The suitcase had been sitting in Scoob's wardrobe for a month. Dad promised Scoob a trip to St. Simons Island this year—Scoob's first choice was Universal Studios, but Dad said Scoob was "too old for all that." (He'd been "too young" the previous year, but whatever.) So Scoob packed up according to Dad's specifications three days before they were supposed to depart.

Except they didn't go.

Scoob got in trouble at school, and voilà: trip cancelled. Lockdown commenced. Half-term ruined before it could begin.

Scoob hadn't been able to bring himself to unpack the bag, so he hid it. Now he can see it sitting on the seat of the dining booth in G'ma's new sweet ride.

Scoob was in such a rush to get out, it didn't *fully* *click* that he and G'ma weren't in the Mini Cooper until she asked him to get out of his seat—while the vehicle was in

motion—and "grab a GPS from the fridge" (that's *Grandma Protein Shake*, other-wise known as *Ensure*) for her.

Fridge? Scoob thought, lightbulb slowly illuminating.

That's when he looked behind him for the first time. And almost choked on the gum that shot down his throat when he gasped.

"Ain't he handsome?" G'ma said, smacking the dashboard twice. "Brand spankin' new, this fella. I've decided to call him Senior after your late grandfather. He and I had a camper van back in the day before your dad was born and your G'pop—" She paused. Then: "Anyway, I ain't gettin' any younger. Sold my house and bought this baby—"

"You *sold your house*?" Scoob said, stunned.

"Sure did. Fetched a pretty penny for it, too. God bless home equity and hipsters lookin' to 'revitalize' or whatever the heck they're calling it."

"Wow." (Was there anything else he could've said? She sold her house!)

"Well, ya gonna get me a GPS or not?"

Scoob gulped, removed his seat belt, and made his way to the back. Dad would've breathed fire and shot smoke out of his ears if he'd been around to see.

As he opened the for-*real*, for-real fridge—with separate freezer!—G'ma gave him a rundown of "Senior's" features. "You see those lights above your head?"

Scoob looked up. "Yeah . . ."

"Those are *LEDs*," she said. "Real state-of-the art! There's also a microwave, a *two*-burner stove top, and two ultra-HD TVs where you can watch anything! Rated PG-13 or lower, that is."

Scoob rolled his eyes.

G'ma pushed on. "Bathroom's there to the left of the mini-pantry—got a flushing toilet and a shower! And that booth you see there? Doubles as a bed. And speaking of beds, there's one in the rear for me, and one for you right above the cab here.

There's a window up there and everything, kiddo!"

Scoob could hear the proud smile in her voice.

Which made him smile too. Despite the fact that she'd called him kiddo.

As he grabbed the drink for G'ma and saw that the fridge was fully stocked, Scoob realized he'd never again play on the old tyre swing in G'ma's garden or kick back on the old window seat in the attic with his favorite book.

When it hit him that *this*, this bizarre truck that contained everything a person needs to live, this *thing* was now G'ma's house?

Creepy.

G'ma's fingers do a tap dance on the steering wheel, pulling him back into the present, and he takes a deep breath and lets his eyes continue to roam around the open space behind him. It's so weird to him that if he has to pee, all he's got to do is walk like five metres to the little bathroom. And it *flushes*? Where does the stuff even go? It's not like they're connected to a sewer. And what about the dirty dish and shower water?

G'ma's house had one of those old-school baths with the fancy metal feet, and Scoob secretly loved to get in with one or two of the lemon-sized balls G'ma would buy that would fizz up like Alka-Seltzer and turn the bath all kinds of wild colours.

Plop! Fizzzzzzz . . . and the water would be blue and kind of shimmery. Like taking a soak in the galaxy.

This caravan doesn't have a tub. So no more galaxy baths.

His gaze catches on the kitchenette thingy as he faces forward. Which just adds to his sudden sadness. He can't imagine G'ma making her blue-ribbon-winning cast-iron French toast—first pan-toasted, then baked in the pan for a few minutes for extra crispiness on the outside—on that tiny cooker thingy. No more extra-sweet iced teas on the porch swing. No more reading in front of the fire.

In all honesty, the caravan gives Scoob the creeps. But of course he can't tell G'ma that. Not when she's so excited about it.

“Well?” she says, taking her baby-blue eyes off the road to look at him. Second only to Shenice’s honey-brown ones, G’ma’s got the prettiest eyes Scoob’s ever seen. “What do you think, kiddo?”

Scoob traces the handle of his door and gulps down his true feelings.

“I think it’s great, G’ma!” he says with forced enthusiasm.

Whether or not she can tell he’s lying, Scoob doesn’t know.

“Good,” she says. “Settle on in. We’ve got quite a way to go.”