

VARIATION

A novel

REBECCA

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

YARROS

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To my mother

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CHAPTER ONE

Hudson

Eleven years ago

On days like this, I understood why seventy-three percent of candidates for rescue swimmer school didn't make it through training. I had two summers left to make sure I'd be in the twenty-seven percent who would.

The afternoon weather off the southern coast of Cape Cod served up six-foot seas, complete with whitecaps and a side of hypothermia for Memorial Day. It might have been miserable and challenging, but it was the perfect weather for practice.

Tired had hit twenty minutes ago, exhaustion followed ten minutes later, and I was quickly approaching full-out ruin, but I needed five more minutes. Another hundred yards would put me past my personal best in these kinds of swells, and I wasn't quitting until I hit that mark.

Three hundred seconds was nothing in the scheme of things.

I concentrated on my breath work, kept my head down, and swam forward, counting each of those seconds. At two hundred and eleven, I sucked in a breath of pure salt water and came up coughing, ripping out my mouthpiece as soon as I was free of the swell that had overtaken the tube of the snorkel.

"Hudson!" Gavin shouted from my left, killing the motor of the twenty-three-foot fishing boat our father lovingly referred to as his fourth

child, though she'd qualify as his first, given her age. "Enough for the day."

"I need another thirty yards for a personal best," I called back, treading water through the next swell.

"You need to get your ass in the boat before the swells get any higher," he countered, looking over his sunglasses from the dashboard despite the overcast sky. "You're wrecked. Thirty yards isn't going to happen."

"Go to hell." I popped my mouthpiece in and prepared to go again just to prove I could.

"This hangover is kicking my ass, and unless you want Caroline at the helm for your next practice session, you'll get in here before I have to circle back in this current." He walked toward the stern as the boat drifted, then leaned over and unfastened the swinging top of the ladder before pushing it into the water.

Shit. He wasn't kidding.

Our older sister was a clucking mother hen who would never remotely consider bringing me out in seas like this, which meant the personal best was going to have to wait. Frustration kept me warm for the next handful of strokes as I made my way toward the boat. Then I timed the stern's rise and fall with the swells before heaving myself up the three-rung ladder.

"I've missed you and I'm glad you're home, but you suck. I almost had it." I climbed over the narrow swimming deck and onto the towel-covered seat, then pulled up the ladder. Dad would murder us if we didn't protect the faded leather. The boat pitched again as I ripped off my face mask, then the hood of my wet suit, and tossed them into the black canvas duffel near Gavin's feet.

"You wound me, little brother." He touched his chest sarcastically and held on to the back of the driver's seat with the next swell. "Let's get home so I can listen to the lecture Dad's been working on all day. I'd hate for him to go to all that work and have no one to deliver his speech to."

“He’s just . . .” Words failed me, just like they had since he’d announced his decision in the middle of our parents’ café this morning.

“Disappointed that I’m dropping out of college,” Gavin supplied. “Unlike Caroline, who managed to get her degree while married and holding down *two* jobs.”

“Don’t compare yourself to our sister, and give Dad a break. He’s just stunned.” I peeled off the rest of my suit, leaving me in a pair of his old Hawaiian-print trunks once I ditched the diving socks too.

“I changed my major four times in two years,” Gavin said, reaching above the wheel for my Bruins cap. “Trust me, Dad isn’t shocked.”

Good point. Gavin was known for a good time, not for sticking things out.

“You could spend the night at Caroline and Sean’s while Mom smooths it over.” I made my way over the salt-and-sun-worn deck carpet toward him.

“I’m not leaving Mom with my mess. Subject change.” A smile curved Gavin’s mouth. “You’re barely seventeen and here you are dumping your savings into a new wet suit. It’s like you’re trying to actually swim your way to Alaska. Don’t think I didn’t notice that map above your bed.”

“Some dreams don’t change.” I’d stumbled onto a documentary three years ago and wanted to be a rescue swimmer stationed in Sitka ever since. Helping people? Check. Adrenaline? Check. Moving to the other side of the country from the only place I’d ever lived? Check. I grabbed the towel from the back seat, then ran it over my head and chest before dragging a T-shirt on. “And thank you for bringing me out. Dad gets busy.”

“I’ll bring you every day if it helps.” Gavin shoved my hat at my chest, keeping perfect balance as the boat heaved.

“Thanks.” I knew better than to take him at his word. He had the best of intentions, but follow-through wasn’t his strong suit. “The practice is probably a little overkill, but it gives me something to work for.” Goose

bumps rose along my arms with the breeze as I set my hat on backward. Sixty-four degrees was a high for this time of year, but it was still fucking freezing right out of the water.

“Which I respect.” He turned the key, starting the engine but keeping it in idle as he looked past me. “Is that a *rowboat*?”

“Out here? No way.” My head whipped to follow his line of sight, and I quickly spotted the small vessel about a hundred meters west, with what looked to be a small outboard motor and two people . . . ducking?

“What the hell are they doing?” Gavin asked as the boaters blinked in and out between the swells, repeatedly leaned down in what had to be their seats. “Bobbing?”

My stomach sank like a boulder thrown overboard, and I grabbed the binoculars from the glove box and peered through the lenses at the other boat.

Damn it. Two girls about my age sat in the middle of what looked to be a fourteen-footer with a tiny outbound motor that had seen better days, scooping out water with their bare hands. “They aren’t bobbing, they’re bailing.” And neither of the brunettes was wearing a life jacket. I handed Gavin the binoculars, and he lifted them to his eyes. “We have to help.”

“Well, shit.” Gavin threw the binoculars into the glove box and slammed it shut. “Hold on.”

I braced one hand on the edge of the windshield and the other on the dashboard’s handrailing as Gavin punched the throttle.

The front of our boat kissed the sky before Gavin adjusted the trim, and we nearly planed as the boat came level, but there was no softening the swells’ blows against the hull. After the third bone-jarring hit nearly threw us sideways, Gavin swore and adjusted our approach.

“We’ll have to come at them—” he started.

“With the current,” I finished. Spray drenched the windshield with every wave. I kept my eyes locked on the vessel, and fear shot through

me, quickly chased by adrenaline as the little boat tipped downward with the next swell and water rushed over the bow.

If they'd been in trouble before, they were in imminent danger now.

I moved to starboard behind Gavin and flipped up the back passenger seat as he pulled back on the throttle and slowed our approach. Boats didn't exactly have brakes. You had to be *kidding* me. "There are only two life jackets?"

"Only two of us on board," Gavin called back as we slowed to idle about twenty meters off the vessel's port side.

I yanked on one of the bright-yellow vests and fastened the three clips across my torso, then reached for the second and did the same, yanking on the tabs to expand the size to fit over the first. "Can you get us closer?"

"Not without drifting right into them or past them," he answered, taking off his sunglasses. "Fuck, I think they're—"

"Help!" the girl in the pink shirt shouted, standing at the bow of the violently rocking boat and waving her hands frantically as if there was some chance we *hadn't* seen them.

My eyes widened. "Sit down!" What the hell was she thinking?

"Give me a jacket." Gavin stuck out his hand.

The girl sitting in the back lunged for the other one, but the damage was done, and the next swell came over the side of the already destabilized boat and capsized it.

The girls disappeared into the water, and my heart lurched.

"I'm going." I climbed onto the passenger seat. There was no time to wait.

"Like hell you are. I'm not letting you—"

I dove.

With a wet suit, the water had been barely tolerable. Without it, the temperature hit like a punch to the gut, and I fought to keep the air in my lungs. The life jackets tugged me upward, and I drew in a full breath as soon as I broke the surface, salt stinging my eyes.

“Damn it, Hudson!” Gavin shouted from somewhere behind me, but I was too focused on swimming to answer.

Please, God, let them both be alive.

I moved faster than ever, even encumbered by the jackets, fueled by adrenaline and terror at what was waiting for me.

My heart pounded as I approached the bow of the capsized boat and found the two women clinging to the side. Their hands gripped the ridge along the bottom of the shallow hull, and relief stole my words. They were fine. In a precarious but deteriorating situation, but alive and . . . arguing?

“I didn’t *know* it had a hole!” the one in the pink shirt shrieked at the girl in green, who had her back turned toward me. “Or that it was low on gas, and I certainly didn’t ask you to jump in as I left the boathouse!”

“Of course I jumped in,” the one in the green replied, her voice surprisingly calm despite the distinct sound of chattering teeth. “I thought I could stop you. Dad told us to *never* take this boat.”

“I just wanted a few minutes away from *her!*” the girl in pink wailed. “And now she’s going to kill us both when she finds out we sank the boat!”

“Feel like getting out of here?” I asked, my chest heaving beneath the jackets as I swam around the side of the vessel.

Both women snapped their heads my direction, soaked ponytails flinging water as they looked over their shoulders at me.

It was the streak of red down the closest girl’s temple that caught my attention, but it was her eyes that kept it. They were almost too big for her heart-shaped face, the color of straight-up whiskey, and bordered by thick, water-spiked lashes that lowered as her focus swept over me and lingered on the buckles at the top of my chest.

The second her gaze lifted to lock with mine, I forgot how to fucking *breathe*, let alone think. I’d never been hit by lightning, but I bet this was what it felt like. And she was bleeding. Right. *Get ahold of yourself.*

“You’re hurt—” I started, my chest tightening with a completely irrational amount of worry.

“Oh thank God!” The girl in pink pushed off the boat and flung herself my direction.

I caught her on pure instinct.

“I’m only fourteen, and that’s entirely too young to die just because I didn’t check the gas . . . or the boat,” the girl in pink declared dramatically, clutching my shoulders as she looked up at me with frightened brown eyes. “And I don’t swim very well.”

And she’d come out on an ancient rowboat without a life jacket? “Give me a second and we’ll get you sorted.” I kicked toward the boat. “Hold on like your life depends on it.”

The girl drew back her head in indignation, her jaw practically unhinging.

“He’s wearing two life jackets, Eva,” the girl with the whiskey eyes said quietly. “You need to get one of them on before he can take you back to his boat.”

“Oh. Of course.” Eva grabbed hold of the hull as another swell lifted, then dropped us but didn’t submerge the vessel. “You’ll come back for Allie, right?”

“I’ll be fine, Eva—” the other started to argue.

“Actually, I think I need to take you back first,” I said to the girl in green—who I assumed was Allie—as the cold seeped into my very bones.

“She’s sixteen, and she swims way better than I do.” Eva’s voice rose.

“That’s absolutely true.” Allie’s teeth chattered. “Please take Eva. I’ll wait.”

“You’re *bleeding*, and we don’t have time to argue.” I kicked to stay between them as the current dragged us along.

“It’s just my scalp, not my legs. I’ll be fine.” Her worried gaze darted toward Eva.

“I’m sorry?” In what world was a head wound better than one to an extremity?

“She really doesn’t swim well. Please get her out of here,” Allie pleaded, pink water dripping off her jaw. “What’s your name?”

“Hudson Ellis.” This was taking too long. I undid the top set of buckles, and Eva snatched the jacket as soon as it cleared my shoulders. “Hey—”

“Hudson.” Allie’s teeth chattered. “I’m Alessandra. I don’t know if you have siblings, but there’s nothing more important to me than my sisters.”

Sisters. That explained her refusal.

“Except dancing,” Eva muttered, shoving her arms into the life jacket one by one as another swell rocked us.

“*Nothing,*” Alessandra repeated, holding my gaze hostage. “You have to take my little sister first. Please. I can’t leave her here.” Fear streaked through her eyes, knitting her brow and pursing her lips, but she raised her pointed chin. “I won’t go until she does.”

Shit. Just like I could never leave Caroline or Gavin. I understood that need on a cellular, primal level. We might give each other shit, but we showed up for each other come hell or high water, and Alessandra felt just as vehemently about her siblings as I did. Something inside my chest cracked open, and every ounce of my common sense must have spilled out into the water, because that one simple demand made me feel like I *knew* her.

“I have siblings,” I said, reaching for the next set of buckles. “I get it.”

Her eyes quickly narrowed in confusion. “What are you doing?”

I shrugged my right arm out of the jacket, then reached up to hold on to the boat between them before sliding the rest of the yellow neoprene-covered flotation device off my left arm and offering it to her. “Put it on.”

“No.” She glanced down at the jacket and back to me. “You need that. The waves are too high.”

“I don’t. I’m a great swimmer, and this is the only compromise I can think of.” I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “It will take us less than five minutes to get you both in the boat.”

“Five minutes?” Eva panicked.

“Less than,” I repeated, keeping my eyes on Alessandra. “Anything is doable for five minutes. I’ll stay with you both the entire time. Take the jacket.” It went against everything I’d ever read about performing rescues, but I couldn’t bring myself to give a shit.

“I can’t do that to you.” She shook her head.

“I’m a stranger,” I reminded her.

“No. You’re Hudson Ellis.” Her arms trembled.

“Then we’re at an impasse, because you won’t leave your sister and I won’t leave you.” I pushed the life jacket toward her. “I’m pretty stubborn, so all waiting does is prolong the time you’re both in the water.”

“Come on, Allie, I’m *freezing!*” Eva cajoled.

Alessandra took the jacket, and once she had it on, all three of us swam toward Gavin.

By the time I got the girls into the boat, both their lips carried a bluish tinge, and the waves had devoured whatever was left of their rowboat.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Gavin snapped at me.

“They’re alive.” I gave my black Rip Curl hoodie to Alessandra despite her initial protest, then handed almost every towel we had to Eva before sitting them both down. “We should get you to a doctor.”

Alessandra shook her head, zipping up my sweatshirt. “Our mother will realize we’re gone.”

Seriously? My eyebrows hit my hairline.

“If you need a doctor, then we have to go,” Eva whispered.

“I don’t,” Alessandra assured, her tone sharpening toward her sister. “Can you imagine what she’ll do to us?”

The fuck? Even when Gav and I were caught doing something we weren’t supposed to, Mom’s first reaction was always relief that our idiocy