

2ND PROOF

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She's the mother of six children and is currently surviving the teenage years with two of her four hockey-playing sons. When she's not writing, you can find her at the hockey rink or sneaking in some guitar time while guzzling coffee. She and her family live in Colorado with their stubborn English bulldogs, two feisty chinchillas and a Maine Coon cat named Artemis, who rules them all.

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Also by Rebecca Yarros

Empyrean

Fourth Wing

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Beyond What Is Given

Hallowed Ground

The Reality of Everything

Renegades

Wilder

Nova

Rebel

Legacy

Point of Origin (Novella)

Ignite (Novella)

Reason to Believe

Muses and Melodies

A Little Too Close

**THE
REALITY
OF
EVERYTHING**

REBECCA
NO.1 SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
YARROS



PIATKUS

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*To Karen Grove, the Original Flygirl.
For 1.3 million words,
some of which had four letters.
Thank you for taking a chance on Josh Walker—
for taking a chance on me.*

The Reality of Everything is a heart-wrenching story with a happy ending. However, the story includes elements that might not be suitable for all readers. Major depictions of grief, anxiety attacks, military service and deployment, and natural disaster are depicted, and the death of a significant other is discussed. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note.

CHAPTER ONE

MORGAN

Take the money. Use it. Don't just give it to charity or stick it in a bank account, Morgan. Spend it on something that brings you happiness. Use it to leave like you always planned. I just wish I were going with you.

Okay. So maybe I was in over my head. As if the octagon-shaped house agreed with my thoughts, one of the struggling shutters on the third floor gave up its battle with the ocean breeze and came loose with a loud creak.

All three of us leaned to the right, following the slow slide of the doomed shutter until it snapped free, slammed into another shutter, knocking it loose, and finally fell thirty feet to the sand below.

“Let me get this straight,” Sam said, sliding her sunglasses down her nose to peer over the frames at the stilted beach house that—as of thirty-six hours ago—I now owned. “Will left you five hundred thousand dollars, and you bought this.”

“Not exactly,” I drawled. They both turned their heads slowly toward mine. “Will left me a secondary life insurance policy worth five hundred thousand. His attorney invested it until I was ready to do something, and it ended up a little over six hundred.”

“And you bought this,” Sam repeated, her hazel-green eyes wide with disbelief.

“Yep.” Sure it kind of resembled a giant mushroom, but the

price had been right.

“To tear down?” she asked.

“I’m fixing it up,” I declared, my voice a hell of a lot stronger than my certainty. That had been one of the conditions of the purchase.

The house groaned, and we tilted our heads to the left as the previously assaulted shutter submitted to gravity and plummeted down the gray-shingled exterior, landing next to its partner like a tombstone in the sand.

“Even the exterior is jumping ship,” Mia muttered from my other side, folding her arms across her chest. As our only Outer Banks local, her appraisal gave me pause. If anyone knew beach houses, it was Mia. She was more than Sam’s sister-in-law; she’d grown up an hour north of here and was currently studying architecture at UNC Charlotte.

“It survived the last hurricane,” I argued on behalf of the house.

“Barely,” Mia muttered, walking forward to examine the stilts.

Hence why it had been so cheap.

“It’s not that bad.” My voice pitched a little high. Maybe it was weathered, rather ugly, odd-shaped, and appeared to be falling apart, but I’d been assured that the bones were good.

I received two doses of side-eye from my girlfriends.

“It was bad enough for you to call in reinforcements.” Sam raised her eyebrows. “Not that I’m complaining. I’m just glad I happened to be visiting Grayson’s parents when you called. Plus, it’s been ages since I’ve seen you.”

Guilt pricked me right in the heart.

“It hasn’t been *ages*. I saw you at your wedding just two months ago.”

“Oh, you mean the half hour you were at the reception before leaving Vegas? You didn’t even say good-bye to Paisley.” Her tone teased, but I felt the underlying worry.

“Yeah, well...” I took a deep breath, searching for the words that had eluded me for the last twenty-two months. How did you tell your best friends that as much as you loved them, you simply

couldn't stand to be around them? Or their happiness? "I wanted to stay, but I...couldn't." It sounded lame even to my ears.

"Still?" she asked softly.

"Still."

Sam was the only one in our group of friends I could talk to without being 95 percent fake about how I was doing. Maybe it was because she'd been my roommate for a while in college. Maybe it was because she didn't point to the calendar and push me to be all healed, pretty, and ready for social niceties. Or maybe it was because she didn't shove her happiness in my face. The others...well, they oozed happiness and then left it lying around like glitter you could never get out of the carpet.

And sure, Sam had fallen in love with Grayson, one of our flyboys, while he was in army flight school, but Grayson hadn't been tangled up in what followed afterward.

It was always Josh and Ember.

Then Paisley and Jagger.

And Sam and Grayson.

I had assumed it would be Will and me...until he was killed in Afghanistan.

The girl I'd been, the one who believed in happily-ever-afters, had died with him.

I didn't even know the woman I was now—just that she had a fixer-upper beach house and a master's degree in childhood education and English. The rest of me was a whole lot of empty, and whatever wasn't empty was pain.

"They miss you," Sam said softly. "Ember. Paisley. The guys."

"I'll get there." The promise felt as hollow as my heart. "Just not yet."

"And until then, we get to have you," Mia offered with a supportive smile.

"And maybe being here will help you heal at your own pace instead of everyone else's." Sam's posture softened, and she squeezed my arm gently. "Why don't you show us the inside of this monstrosity?"

“Yeah, let’s do that,” I agreed, thankful she let me off the hook like always.

We climbed the stairs that led from the pedestal garage to the first floor of the house. The homes around here were all on stilts to protect them from the rising waters brought in from storm surges, and my house was no exception.

My house. It wasn’t really mine, though, was it? It was his. Bought with money I’d never wanted from something I’d spent nights praying would never happen.

“Watch the landing.” I skipped over the split board halfway up the staircase.

“You know, you could always wait six months for Grayson to get home from deployment. I bet he’d be happy to lend a hammer,” Sam suggested as we crossed the dilapidated deck to the front door.

“In six months, this thing might be a heap on the beach,” Mia teased, pulling her black curls into a ponytail. She was unlike her brother in almost every way. Petite where he was broad, ivory-skinned where her brother had a perpetual tan, and bright blue eyes where Grayson’s were more the color of gunmetal. But her stubborn streak? Yeah, that was all Grayson. Good thing Sam had an even bigger one to put up with him.

“Oh, come on, you haven’t even seen the inside yet!” I argued.

“I’m picturing something very *Addams Family*,” Mia drawled. “I mean, I’m delighted you took the job at Cape Hatteras Elementary, but maybe I should have come down and checked this out for you. Or sent Joey. Or someone. Anyone.”

I paused with my hand on the sun-warmed door handle. It was in the seventies, which was warm for mid-March in the Outer Banks. It was nothing compared to the intensity summer would bring. Luckily, having been born and raised in southern Alabama, I was no stranger to heat or humidity.

“Okay, so buying it when all I’d seen were the pictures on Zillow and the inspection report was risky, but just wait.” The door stuck, and I forced it open with a shove of my shoulder before stepping

into the small foyer. Aged wood paneling greeted us along every wall as I led them toward the living room.

“Holy shit,” Sam whispered, her jaw dropping at the view.

“Exactly.” The wall of windows looking out over the Atlantic was what had convinced me to pull the financial trigger and buy.

We walked across the spongy, avocado-green carpet that matched the kitchen walls, counters, and appliances, and I opened the sliding glass door with a cringe-worthy squeak. “Ignore that boarded-up window.” I nodded toward the south-most side.

“And that one, too?” Sam pointed toward another segment of plywood.

“Yep. And watch for the missing boards out here.”

The salty ocean breeze lifted the hair off my neck and back as the girls followed me across the wide deck until we rested our hands on the splintered wooden railing. Below, the small, fenced yard ended with a gate leading to a short wooden path that climbed over the dune to a deserted beach about a hundred feet away.

Waves crashed with soothing regularity, coming in a hypnotizing rhythm.

Can you believe people actually live here? Talk about paradise. His voice slid across my heart, and my eyes fluttered shut at the sharp, sweet pain the memory inflicted. It had been almost two years since I stood on a deck like this one, farther up the coast in Nags Head, with Will.

Now I was one of the people who actually lived here. He would have loved it.

“Okay, now I can see why you bought it.” Mia’s gaze drifted north, then south. “What year was this built? Early fifties?”

“Fifty-one,” I replied. “How did you know?”

“There are no other houses beyond the dunes. You and your lone neighbor right there are the only ones for miles. Hatteras has a protected beachfront, and my guess is this was built right before the Seashore was established as a national park. Wow. I wonder how it escaped the eminent domain proceedings back then. The land has

to be worth a million bucks, Morgan.”

“Maybe if you tear the house down, but there’s a clause in my purchase contract that if the structure ceases to exist or is extended beyond a certain point, the land reverts back to the government. Fixing it is my only option.”

Mia shook her head. “With the damage from last year’s hurricane, this must have blended in with all the other fixer-uppers. You have your work cut out for you, but you seriously lucked out with the real estate. Shape of the house isn’t bad, either. Looks awkward as hell, but it actually deflects the wind like a champ. Probably why it’s still standing.”

“So it will always be just you and your lone neighbor,” Sam surmised. “By the way, why didn’t you buy that one?” She nodded toward the house next door. It was a bit smaller but in perfect condition.

“Because it wasn’t for sale. Besides, I like this house...well, the possibilities, anyway.” It was twenty-five hundred square feet, had been in my price range, and felt like I did—weathered, beaten, and broken in ways that needed more than just a coat of paint.

It was a kindred spirit.

“Well, I know what I’m checking out next. The beach!” Sam headed toward the northernmost staircase off the back deck.

We followed her through the sandy yard, past the gate, and up the wood-planked path that led over the dune.

“You’ll have to shovel the rest of this out,” Mia said, pointing to the sand-covered path as we crested the small hill. “The wind picks up the sand from the beach and leaves it right here. Hence the dune. But it protects the house.”

“Got it.” I made a mental note, and we hiked down the first five feet, then slid the remaining ten or so of the dune until we reached the beach. I gathered my flip-flops in one hand and surveyed the beach. Other than a few families farther up the coast, it was deserted. “It’s so quiet.”

“Just the way we like it,” Mia noted with a grin as we walked

toward the water. “It’ll pick up in a couple weeks for spring break, and we’re slammed in the summer, but once the tourists leave, it will pretty much look like this.”

“It’s peaceful,” Sam remarked.

Peace? I hadn’t felt anything close to that emotion in the last couple of years. I wasn’t even sure it existed in my reality. But the water, the sand, and the crisp breeze were soothing. That was enough.

The sand grew firm and damp the farther we walked, and I paused, watching the ocean rush up to meet my toes and then overtake them. The water was deliciously cool, and it wasn’t long before I sank slightly, sand eventually covering my feet.

Color flashed next to my toes. When the next wave retreated, I scooped a small handful of wet sand and held my fingers slightly apart as the water returned, letting the sand strain through the gaps to reveal a slightly rounded, quarter-sized piece of frosted blue glass.

“What is...” Sam shielded her eyes from the midday sun as she gawked at something in the water. “Whoa.”

I mimicked her pose and saw a man coming out of the ocean a dozen yards away.

Mercy.

He was... Well, for a lit major, I was completely, ironically speechless. Water sluiced down the cut lines of his muscles like he was some kind of ocean deity as he walked out of the surf, the black swim trunks contrasting his tan skin like the black tattoo that ran down his side.

His abs had abs.

He rubbed his hands over a thick head of light brown hair, rolled his broad shoulders, and then jogged down the beach, straight toward us.

“Oh. My. God.” Mia drawled out every word. “Is he real? Am I dreaming, or do ridiculously hot men just appear from the water around here?”

“I don’t even know,” Sam answered as he got closer.

The wind whipped my long hair across my face, and I quickly fisted the unruly brown locks and the rebellious hem of my dress as he nearly reached us.

Sweet Lord, he was a scorcher if I'd ever seen one. Strong nose, carved chin, full, chiseled lips with a Captain America edge that made me want to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. It was like God himself had crammed everything I found attractive into one man and dropped him into the ocean by my house.

"Afternoon, ladies," he said with a slight smile, his breathing as even as his pace.

Ocean-blue eyes. Of course. Just a shade darker than the glass I held in my hand. They locked with mine, widening for a second before he passed and continued his run down the beach.

"No southern accent," I said once I'd found my vocal cords. "Must be a tourist."

"Seriously, I'm going to visit you every weekend if this is how the island treats you." Mia walked toward the water and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Chris Hemsworth, please! Or I'll settle for Liam!"

"Seriously, Mia. The ocean doesn't take requests." Sam rolled her eyes. "Not that we don't have a habit of meeting boys at the beach in our little group. What was it Paisley called Jagger?"

"Mr. California," I answered, remembering the day she'd met him on the coast of Florida almost four years ago. *But their story has a happy ending.*

My eyes followed the retreating form of our jogger.

"Ah, that's right. That one doesn't feel like a California, though," she mused.

"More like Mr. Carolina," I offered.

"Ahh, Carolina." The girls sighed in tandem.

He continued down the shore, and relief replaced the butterflies that had assaulted my stomach. As long as men like that didn't pop out of the ocean every day, I was in the clear.

Not like I was in the market for a relationship, anyway. It was

impossible to offer someone a heart I didn't have. Mine was buried over five hundred miles away at West Point.

Mia and Sam chatted while we climbed back to the house and then took the grand tour of what my heartache had bought me. Bedrooms, bathrooms—it all needed to be overhauled.

“Well?” I asked as the girls took stock of the kitchen.

“Honest opinion?” Mia leaned against one of the Formica counters.

“Of course.”

She and Sam shared a glance.

“What?”

“We need to call Joey,” Mia said.

“Joey, as in your sister?” I asked.

She nodded. “She manages Masters & Co.”

“The family boat-building business,” Sam clarified.

“That's right. You guys build racing boats or something, right?” I hated that I wasn't as familiar with Grayson's family as I should have been, seeing as I'd met them a couple years ago.

“Or something,” Mia said with a smirk. “But Joey knows all the reputable contractors in the OBX. She'll be able to give you a good list to start with...unless you were thinking you'd head to the hardware store and start ripping stuff out yourself?” Her eyes widened. “Please say that's not what you're thinking.”

“Kind of.” I shrugged at the horrified looks on both their faces.

“Oh, Morgan. Not only no, but *hell* no. You're not...” Sam motioned to the house. “I know you're a huge HGTV fan, but this is not in your wheelhouse, and I say that with all the love in my heart.”

“At least the structural stuff needs to be handled by professionals,” Mia urged. “Remodeling on the beach is tricky.”

My stubbornness softened at the plea in their eyes. What harm could getting a few bids on the bigger projects be?

“Fine. Call Joey. Whatever I can't do myself, I'll hire contractors for. Sound good?”

“Yep.”

“Absolutely.”

A couple hours later, Mia had gone in search of pizza, and Sam, tequila.

I, on the other hand, was on a quest for the lights. The sun would set in a couple of hours, and I wasn't going to unload what little I had brought with me with only half the lights on.

I flipped through the file the real estate agent had left for me in the kitchen. “Secondary breaker in the garage,” I read aloud. Why in the hell would someone put another breaker box there? Maybe Sam and Mia were right; I'd at least need a contractor for the electrical work.

There was probably another half hour before the girls got back, which meant if I found that box quickly, we could have the whole house lit.

I rushed out my front door, not bothering to close it, and raced down the steps, jumping to the landing—

SNAP.

The sound registered in my brain about a millisecond before I plummeted through the landing. I shrieked, throwing out my arms to catch my weight on the remaining platform. My boobs took the rest of the impact as they slammed against the edge of the hole I'd made with my lower half.

Blinding pain ripped through me as my body scraped to a halt, but I didn't fall through.

The sound that left my mouth was anything but ladylike. Holy shit, it hurt. Fire raced up my sides from thighs to ribs, and I was pretty sure my full Ds were going to mutiny back to an A-cup, or just fall right off.

I took a few breaths to steady my heart, praying the pain would subside, and then struggled to get my elbows under me. Maybe I

could lift just a little...nope.

You have to be fucking kidding me.

There was no moving. None. Nada. Zip. I was firmly wedged in a hole of my own making without enough leverage to hoist myself out.

A huff of self-deprecating laughter slipped free. Talk about a metaphor for my life. Will would have laughed his smug little ass off.

“Yeah, I bet you think this is hilarious and symbolic or some nonsense,” I muttered, slipping into the familiar pattern of talking to him when I was alone.

I swiveled my legs as far as I dared, hoping to find some purchase, but came into contact with nothing. *Of course not.* I was easily seven or eight feet off the ground here.

Not deadly. Just annoying. Humiliating, if I was still here by the time Sam and Mia got back. Way to prove that I’d be totally fine out here on my own. I hadn’t even made it through one day.

I jiggled a bit and tried to squeeze my girls down through the opening.

Ouch. That wasn’t happening. What skin wasn’t already raw from the scrape was protesting the pressure from the remaining boards.

The sound of footsteps caught my attention, and I looked over to my neighbor’s deck to see a little red-haired girl skipping down her stairs toward me.

She had that kindergarten look about her—all round cheeks and wide eyes. Around five years old was my best guess, which meant there had to be an adult home, too.

“Oh, thank God. Hi, sugar, how are you?” I asked as she raced across the thirty feet or so between our houses.

She paused shy of my staircase, her riot of curls stopping a second after the rest of her.

“Hi. I’m not supposed to be out here alone, but I heard you yell. You’re stuck.” Her forehead puckered over big brown eyes as her southern accent dragged out that last word just like mine would

have. *Not a tourist.* At least that meant the house next door wasn't a vacation rental.

"I am," I admitted. "I'm Morgan, your neighbor."

Her eyes widened. "Our new neighbor? We had old ones. Really, really old ones. They didn't get stuck."

I might have laughed if the wood against my ribs would have let my chest expand that far.

"That's who I bought the house from. What's your name?"

"I'm Finley. Daddy calls me Fin. Like a fish. Or a shark." She wandered under the landing, and I lost sight of her.

My feet stilled immediately. I wasn't taking any chances I'd kick her on accident.

"Hey, I like Hello Kitty, too!" She squealed in delight. "I have the boring Saturday undies on today, but that's because I don't like the Sunday ones. They're green."

"Hello Kitty..." *Oh. My. God.* I assessed my situation more carefully, seeing fabric pooled beneath my breasts in a way it shouldn't be. And that breeze? Oh no. No, no, *no.*

Earth, just swallow me up right now. Right now.

"You're really heavy, Miss Morgan!" Bless her little soul, she tried to push my feet up, but I didn't budge.

"I'm sure feeling that way, Fin. Can you do me a favor?"

She emerged and looked up at me, folding her arms across her chest. "You're really stuck in there. I'll get Dad's saw."

"Oh, that's not necessary! But really, so kind of you to offer. Do you think you could get your mama for me?" *Please, God.* There was no way I was going to wait another minute stuck in this damned staircase, flashing everyone on Cape Hatteras. Nope. No way. Hello Kitty needed to say good-bye.

"No." The girl shrugged, walking away.

"No?" I questioned, sure my eyes were about to pop out of my head.

"She lives in California."

"Oh—"

“But I’ll get my daddy. Don’t worry, he’s really good at rescuing people!” She raced up her deck stairs.

“No! No, I’m okay! I’ll just wait for my friends!” I called out, but she’d already disappeared into her house.

I blinked, hoping I’d wake up from this new take on the naked-at-school nightmare I was currently living. When that didn’t work, I resigned myself to the fact that I was about to meet my new neighbor.

In my underwear.

While literally wedged in my landing.

So much for first impressions.

Wait. *Shit*. I’d shaved my legs, but waxing had pretty much ceased since...well, a while ago. My landscaping habits had gone from meticulous to well...au naturel. I hadn’t given it much consideration, or even cared until this very moment.

This very inopportune moment.

But my panties were boy-cut, so there was a prayer of a chance that everything would stay covered, right? Could this possibly get any worse?

There had to be a limit on the amount of humiliation someone could endure.

The screen door shut next door, and I bit my lower lip, the pain reminding me yet again that this was definitely not a dream.

“Come on, Daddy!” Finley yelled.

“I’m coming, honey,” a deep voice replied. The footsteps that followed down the steps were heavy, masculine.

“It’s okay, Miss Morgan. I brought my daddy. He was showering, but now he’s not.”

I opened my eyes to see Finley looking up at me with a smile, nodding her head enthusiastically.

“Thank you, Finley.”

A pair of bare feet appeared next to hers, attached to muscular legs that led to a pair of blue swimming trunks and then abs that disappeared as a white T-shirt slid over his stomach and a recognizable tattoo.

I looked up into familiar, ocean-blue eyes and groaned.

Oh God. Just strike me dead. Right now.

It was Mr. Carolina.

Apparently, there was *not* a limit on humiliation.