

RACHEL HAUCK

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE
SANDS
OF
SEA BLUE
BEACH



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RACHEL HAUCK



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To Sally Longoria



EMERY

Now . . .

New Year's Eve

Well, she did not see this coming. A midnight proposal with all the family around. Yet it was the way of James Gelovani. And he wasn't proposing to her. He was proposing to Ava. Her sister. Two words that she still struggled to reckon with after fifteen years.

Down on one knee, Jamie professed in honeyed tones, "Ava Quinn, beautiful Ava, I never thought I'd find a girl like you. Will you marry me?"

Emery smiled and raised her glass of champagne as the weepy—and beautiful—Ava bent to give her man a kiss and softly answered, "Yes, I'll marry you." Then she shouted, "I'm getting married!"

Emery applauded along with the family—Dad, Joanna, Elianna, and Blakely—then congratulated the happy couple. After all, she'd played a part in their romance by inviting Jamie to the Quinn Family Memorial Day weekend.

Friends since their Ohio State days, Emery went on to become a journalist at the renowned sixty-year-old *Cleveland Free Voice*,

while Jamie conquered the world of law. They lost touch, then reconnected at a Buckeye alumni meeting eight months ago.

The *Free Voice* had just closed down, and she was trying to hustle up another job. Jamie, on the other hand, regaled a crowd of curious Buckeyes about his work on a landmark Bitcoin case. At the end of the night, he and Emery walked to the parking lot together, reminiscing about Saturdays in the Shoe when he'd said, "*I could use a break from this case.*" So she'd invited him to Dad's big M-Day bash.

Somewhere between the Saturday afternoon cookout by the pool, the Sunday Funday at Cedar Point, and the Monday night Cleveland Guardians game, Jamie fell in love with Ava.

He claimed it was when she walked out to the pool deck in front of nearly thirty friends and family—every one a diehard Buckeye alum—wearing head-to-toe Michigan gear and singing their fight song on a dare from a Michigan colleague. Blakely recorded it all on her phone.

Ava had taken her life in her hands wearing *that* getup, singing *that* song, among *those* Buckeye faithful. Yet Jamie, who bled scarlet and gray, thought the move was hysterically gutsy.

"*Em, that's Ava? The sister you talked about at school? She's awesome. Why don't you like her?*"

Who said she didn't like her? She liked her. Loved her, even. But things were complicated in the Quinns' blended household.

As the clock in the hall chimed midnight, Dad passed out champagne. "Happy New Year," he said, raising his glass. "To the Quinn family, and to the soon-to-be new family, Jamie and Ava."

"To the Quinn family. And the future Gelovanis." Jamie gazed at his fiancée as if she were the only woman on earth, and for a moment, Emery felt that flash of yearning for a man to look at her that way.

"Happy New Year to all of us." Joanna, Dad's wife, smiled and

glanced about the circle, her joy visible. Her oldest daughter was getting married.

Dad married Joanna, a widow with two young daughters, a year after Mom died. In a single day, Emery's world went from just the two of them to a stepmother and two pesky little sisters whom Dad adopted right after he said, "I do." The effervescent Blakely arrived a year later as the "whole" meant to bond the "halves."

Dad caught Emery's attention and tipped his head gently toward Ava, who was showing off her ring to Elianna and Blakely. *Go on, get in there with your sisters.*

Over the years, she'd come to understand how desperately he wanted her to feel a part of the family he'd created with Joanna. As a busy high school senior when they married, then a college freshman when Blakely arrived, she'd always felt more like the guest who tagged along with the new husband and father.

In the early days of blending two families, Joanna invited Emery to call her Mom, to which she replied, *"I have a mom. I'll stick with Joanna, if you don't mind."* Or even better, *my dad's wife.* But she didn't go quite that far.

Couldn't they all see? Emery alone carried the legacy of Rosie Quinn, and she'd not let anyone or anything replace her.

"Happy New Year, Emery." Elianna was the affectionate sister, a peacemaker, and a brilliant businesswoman. At twenty-two, she'd taken over her mother's three coffee shops, and in two years, turned red ink into black.

"Guess who will have a list of maid-of-honor duties by tomorrow night?" Emery said, sipping her champagne.

"You?" Elianna said.

Emery laughed. "Guess again. And fifty bucks says she picks pink as her color palette. I don't do pink."

"Happy New Year, big sis." Blakely threw her arms around

Emery. She was the jovial athlete, fourteen going on forty, who knew nothing about stepmothers and moms who died too young.

“Happy New Year, Blake. I have a feeling pink is in your future.”

Blakely glanced toward her glowing sister. “I don’t mind. It’s for Ava.”

Feeling put in her place by her wise little sister, Emery crossed over to hug Ava. “Your new year is off to a good start.”

“I owe it all to you.” Ava lingered in their embrace. “You invited him home.”

“What choice did I have? He looked like a lost puppy working that bitcoin case. His parents lived all the way down in Portsmouth. I felt sorry for him.” She made a face at Jamie, and he laughed.

“Happy New Year, Em,” Jamie said. “Free legal advice for life. You introduced me to my future wife.”

“Whoa, wait until you’re married a few years. I may not want any credit for this.”

“Let’s hope we never need legal help.” Dad had a look that said *Let’s all follow the law* as he poured another round of champagne and gathered everyone for his traditional New Year’s toast. “Here’s to finally getting some additional manpower around here. Welcome to the family, Jamie.”

“To my wedding,” Ava said with a quick glance at her fiancé. “I mean, *our* wedding.” She fell against him, and he buried his face in her hair.

“To a good basketball season,” Blakely said. She was a star freshman on and off the court at an exclusive all-girls high school.

“To Mom and me finding a location for our next Sophisticated Sips café,” Elianna said.

“What Elianna said.” Joanna clinked their glasses.

“Emery?” Dad drew everyone’s attention to her. “What are your plans for the new year?”

She smiled through her embarrassment over being the older, unemployed sister, thirty-two with zero prospects in career or love. Except one. And she was hesitant to accept it.

“To something new and exciting,” she said with too much umph as she raised her glass. “Don’t ask what because I don’t know.”

This year had to be better than the last. Her beloved *Cleveland’s Free Voice* folded. Her boss and mentor, Lou Lennon, the paper’s founder, had refused to sell any assets to the corporate fat cats he’d exposed for sixty years. Then the lease on her downtown loft expired and she had no choice but to move home. Most of her friends were married, having children, buying houses. She’d not been on a date since, well, was it the Governor’s Ball . . . ? No, she went with Tonya, so it had to be the art gallery opening in . . . ? Good grief. Five years. She’d not been on a date in five years?

But she hadn’t cared then. Her professional life had been in full swing, running the *Free Voice* under Lou’s tutelage. When he closed the doors, she’d not felt so lost since Mom died.

She’d scoured the internet for jobs, called all of her contacts from J-school and beyond, managed to land articles in *Marie Claire* and *Glamour*, wrote a piece on the new downtown development for *The Plain Dealer*, and published a four-part political series for an online outlet.

But full-time employment evaded her.

Until this past month. A friend of Lou’s, a man named Elliot Kirby, called her with an editor-in-chief position. But saying yes was unthinkable. A yes meant going back to the saddest place and time in her life. She felt like a square peg facing a round hole.

Yet refusing the job seemed like holing up and hiding.

Elianna snuggled next to Emery. “I think Ava will ask you to be maid of honor.”

“Me? Naw, it’ll be you. And it should. You’re her sister.”

“And you’re her sister too.” Elianna’s voice had a slight edge. “I mean, you didn’t kill her when she spilled purple nail polish all over your shoes just as you were heading out to prom. If that’s not sisterly love, I don’t know what is.”

Emery laughed. “I still think she broke a law of physics when that happened.”

Over the years, she’d warmed to Ava, Elianna, and especially Blakely—who looked just like Dad—but the older two felt more like cousins than siblings.

“Dad,” Ava’s said, “in six or seven months, you’ll be walking me down the aisle.” She planted a kiss on his cheek. “Your first trip.”

“I’ll be crying the whole time.” Dad hugged her close with a side glance at Emery. She knew he felt caught in the middle sometimes, between his only daughter for seventeen years and his new daughters for the last fifteen.

She nodded. *It’s okay.*

“You know she’ll ask to borrow your pearls,” Elianna whispered.

“Not again. She knows better.”

“Since we’re talking about walking down the aisle . . .” Joanna held up the calendar she pinned to the kitchen wall every year. “Let’s talk dates. Ava, Jamie, summer or fall?”

“As soon as possible?” Jamie made a goofy, eager face, and Ava blushed.

So the Quinn family started the new year with the joy of a wedding. While Joanna and the sisters debated the best seasons to get married—Jamie couldn’t get a word in edgewise—Emery left the warmth of the crackling fireplace for the crisp, clean chill on the second-level deck, where a New Year’s snow had started to fall. The icy gusts sent flakes skating over the green pool cover.

“Why don’t we take a walk?” Dad stood beside her with her coat in hand. “We’ve not done that in a long time.”

“Are you sure you want to leave the party?” Emery slipped on her coat.

“They won’t miss us,” he said, heading down the deck stairs and around the side of the house. “And about what Ava said, she—”

“Forget it, Dad.” She tugged on her hat and gloves, then wrapped up in Mom’s old plaid wool scarf. “She’s not wrong.”

Through the glow of the neighbor’s lights and the streetlamps, she caught a hint of sadness in his smile, as if he was afraid to say what he felt.

I wanted it to be you.

It wasn’t a regular conversation when she was a girl, but every now and then he’d say, “*Don’t be in a hurry. I want to walk you down the aisle to the right man.*” In those days, she was his one and only daughter. Then death changed their story.

Dad slipped his arm through hers. “So, what about the job in Sea Blue Beach?”

“Still there. Elliot Kirby texted me tonight.”

“And?”

“He asked me to take the job. I’m afraid Lou talked me up a bit too much.”

“I don’t know, Em. You *were* everything to the *Free Voice* when Lou struggled with his health. You kept it going for him.”

“Okay, fine, I can be an editor-in-chief and do it well. But you know it’s not about the job.”

“It’s about the location.”

“How can it not be? Dad, it’s Sea Blue Beach. I haven’t been there since *that* summer.” Emery’s foot slipped on a dusting of snow, and Dad steadied her as they made their way down the sidewalk.

Tonight, their pretty, suburban Cleveland neighborhood was

quiet under the falling snow and twinkling Christmas lights. Somehow, the atmosphere seemed to respect their conversation.

“If the job was in any other city, would you say yes?” Dad, a Case Western Reserve professor, appealed to her sense of reason.

“I’d be packed and head out tomorrow morning,” Emery said.

The *Sea Blue Beach Gazette* was a historic family newspaper—a unicorn these days—in beautiful Sea Blue Beach, the gem of the north Florida coast. Its focus was mostly microlocal journalism, which Emery loved. News about *you*, literally. About the citizens, local businesses, the schools, and government. The press run was semiweekly, which meant she’d have time to develop a vision for growth.

“Elliot lives in Atlanta, so he won’t be popping in every other day, and I’ll have complete reign.”

“Sounds perfect. Is the pay good?”

“Define *good*.”

Dad’s laugh crackled against the cold. “Can you survive?”

“I can.” She smiled as Southerly Park came into view. Of course he led her here. “I was thinking, if I did go, I’d stay at the Sands Motor Motel.” Emery glanced up at him. “In Cottage 7.”

“I see. You’d prefer that to a house or an apartment? As I recall, the cottages were small and a bit out of date.”

“I’d have two bedrooms. And it’ll only be me unless visitors come. If it’s out of date”—meaning if it looked like the cottage she’d shared with Mom during her last summer—“I wouldn’t mind.”

As they crossed the street into the park’s light, Dad said, “Remember that big red sled you got for Christmas when you were ten?”

“How could I forget? It snowed all day, and we rode down every little hill we could find.”

“Mom’s favorite was the golf course.”

“She crashed into the ditch shouting ‘Fore!’” Emery said. “I didn’t even know what it meant.”

“You shouted back ‘Five!’” Dad laughed. “She broke through the ice trying to climb out. Her feet were soaked.”

“But she wanted one more hill,” Emery said.

Mom conquered all of her hills. Except the last one. Cancer.

“Sledding that Christmas is one of my favorite memories.” Dad’s voice carried a reminiscent tone that made Emery well up. “We finally convinced Mom to go home, dry off, build a big fire, drink hot chocolate, and eat grilled cheese.” Dad squeezed her arm. “You fell asleep on the floor watching *White Christmas*.”

“I miss her,” Emery whispered. “Sometimes when I’m working, I look up, expecting to see her standing in my office.”

“Hard to believe it’s been sixteen years. You know Joanna reminds me of her birthday every year, asks if I want to talk about her. She’s not afraid of my love for your mom, Em. I’m not intimidated by her love for her first husband. The mystery of the human heart is its ability to love so wide and deep.”

“That was very poetic, Dad.”

“Old age setting in.” They arrived at a bench under a streetlamp. He brushed away the snow and motioned for Emery to sit. Mom always swore he was a snowman on the inside. “I want you to be okay with me walking Ava down the aisle first, but I can’t demand it or even really ask.”

“Do I seem that shallow?” Was this the fruit of her resistance to becoming a full-fledged member of the family? “It’s not like Ava did it on purpose. I’m happy for her and Jamie. Compared to the girls he dated in college, Ava is pure gold studded with diamonds.”

Meanwhile, Emery was still waiting for her man to crawl out from under some moss-covered rock. Did every woman in her

early thirties who was floundering in her career wonder if love would find her?

“You should take the job, Emery,” Dad said, low and soft but with conviction. “I’ll miss you. We’ll all miss you. But go to Sea Blue Beach. Maybe you’ll find something there you left behind.”

Walking back home through the swirling, thickening snow, Emery considered Dad’s advice, sorry she made any sort of deal out of Ava being the first daughter down the aisle. She was just frustrated with her career and the pace of her life.

At home, the house had quieted, with Jamie and Ava cuddled on the couch, watching a movie. Blakely was curled on the floor under a heavy blanket, sleeping, and Elianna had gone to bed since she started work at six a.m.

In the kitchen, Joanna loaded the dishwasher. Dad refilled their champagne glasses and kissed his wife, whispering words only husbands and wives share.

“Oh, Emery.” Ava slipped out from under Jamie’s arm and met her by the stairs as she said good night. “You’ll be a bridesmaid, won’t you?”

“As long as we don’t wear pink or puffy sleeves.”

“Define *pink*. And one hundred percent no to the puffy sleeves.”

“Pink as in pink.”

“We’ll talk.”

Emery laughed. “Any shade of pink, Aves.”

“Fine, but, Emery—” Ava glanced up at her. “We looked at a couple of wedding dresses online, just to see, and there was one—”

Emery leaned against the banister, waiting.

“—with pearls. It was so stunning and classic. It was all Lauren Bacall in *How to Marry a Millionaire*. I was wondering—”

“No.”

“Elianna forewarned you, didn’t she?”

“You need a new playbook, Ava.”

“Okay, fine, but I don’t understand why—”

“That’s the problem, Ava. You don’t understand. You can wear pearls with the Lauren Bacall gown, just not mine.” How many times had they had this conversation? Four? Five? In person. Over text. Ava being fixated on Mom’s pearls made zero sense. “Dad and Joanna can give you a set for a bridal gift.”

“But—”

Emery pointed to Ava’s hand. “Your ring is beautiful. Jamie has good taste.”

“He knew what I wanted before I did,” Ava said. “Hey, Em, I’m sorry. Are you mad?”

“I’m not mad. And honestly, I’m really happy for you guys. Good night.”

In her room, she stared out the window, where snow layered the bare tree limbs, and tried to imagine the sun and sand of Sea Blue Beach. She pictured the cute cottages of the Sands Motor Motel, the old brick street going through the east end of town, the Blue Plate Diner, and the semi-famous Starlight skating rink.

She’d become a part of the town as the editor-in-chief of the *Sea Blue Beach Gazette*.

Sun, sand, cute cottage, being her own boss, developing a newspaper like Lou did back in the sixties and seventies? Check, check, check, and check.

Emery snatched up her phone before fear walked in with a list of cons.

Elliot, Happy New Year. Sorry to respond so late, but yes, I’ll take the job. Thank you so much.

As her decision settled in, Elliot pinged a reply.

Excellent. We'll talk tomorrow. Or rather, later today.

Emery readied for bed, then slipped under the covers, clicking off the bedside lamp. She'd finally hammered her square-peg self into that round hole.