

Unlikely Return: A Novel

By Nina Atwood

Excerpt

PROLOGUE

The Wave

The ocean swelled, cerulean waves moved endlessly, peaking and troughing. One wave, traveling hundreds of miles, crossed another, and the two continued as one, larger wave. Later, that wave crossed two more, growing increasingly larger, and so on, until a rogue wave was formed.

Largely considered a maritime myth, now more than 125 feet tall, trough to crest, the rogue wave moved with alarming speed, despite its casual appearance.

Traveling at over 44,000 feet per minute, the wave moved with urgency, but with no destination.

It encountered little. Larger fish dove deep, sensing the disturbance above. Dolphin and other intelligent creatures moved laterally in advance of the wave, recognizing and adroitly avoiding the danger. Smaller fish were borne upward to enormous heights and violently returned below. Sea birds flew away, later winging back to follow in the wake of the wave and take advantage of the feast of small, stunned fish floating on the surface.

The vast ocean around the growing wave lay undisturbed as the behemoth continued to gain power. It had come together without warning—no storm, no shifting of tectonic plates beneath the sea, no resulting earthquake. Here, on the open ocean, no oceanic devices captured the journey of the wave. No one saw, and no one knew.

Ahead, completely oblivious to the enormity of the danger approaching, the passengers of the *Princess Rose* drifted serenely on the open ocean—eating, drinking—believing in their supremacy and, therefore, their safety.

That would all change in an instant.

CHAPTER ONE

Tuesday, early morning

Jack faced the men he would host for the next few days. The tall guy with salt-and-pepper hair, Paul, stood behind the other two. Jack guessed him to be in his early sixties. He was slender, with intelligent eyes that scanned the boat with interest.

The second guy, Stuart, looked around 40, lean but muscular, also on the tall side, the kind of guy who seemed totally at ease in his own skin. He displayed a languid posture with hints of aggressiveness, like a great cat at rest, reserving strength for the sudden burst of predatory energy. He had dark blond hair, light gray eyes, and a direct gaze that was not challenging, not exactly open, but somewhere in between—the kind of guy who didn't miss much.

The third guy, Ben, was not so tall, with a runner's body, eyes averted as if attempting to avoid too much human contact.

They were the usual clients—guys who spent the majority of their lives behind desks. They chartered boats like Jack's for a couple of days at a time because they wanted a vacation from their lives. There was a primal need to see, feel, taste, and smell things in the natural world, and that need eventually called people like Jack's clients into his world.

Jack understood that need better than they ever would. He enjoyed feeling the way he did when the boat was far from land, far from the comforts of everyday life, where the people on his boat, whether they realized it or not, needed him for their very survival. Where he could compete with nature—the ocean, the waves, the weather.

The place where he felt truly alive.

Out there, their smartphones ceased to operate. They were unplugged—and they said they wanted that. But they were not prepared for it—for the utter quiet, the gentle sway of the boat, the absence of the roar of civilization. The inability to check in. No email, no social media, no calls, no voice mails.

Jack's clients typically filled the silence and space with too much alcohol, backslapping, and locker room humor. He put up with all of it because it paid well. Quite well.

When they set foot on his boat, Jack was the Captain, and their business and financial status no longer mattered. He was in his element, and they were out of theirs. He enjoyed that shift in power, though he never abused it.

He got their attention with a nod.

“To make this trip more enjoyable, there are a few things that you need to know. Once we get to the reef, we stop and fish today for three hours. That’s about all the time we’ll have before sunset. We don’t fish at night. We have dinner, we socialize, and we sleep.

“You are free to stay up as late as you want,” he continued, surveying the men, making eye contact as he talked. “We have beer on board, plus whatever you brought with you—but realize that if you get dehydrated from too much alcohol, you won’t have any fun tomorrow. You won’t realize how strongly the sun is affecting you until it’s too late. Drink more water than you think you will need. If you don’t have sunscreen on already, put it on, and keep applying it.

“We start tomorrow early, before sunrise. I will give you one wake-up call. We fish for several hours. We stop around 1:00, have lunch, before going back to fishing. We spend another night on the water, then head back on Thursday.

“I suggest you use lunchtime to rest and hydrate, so you’ll be ready for afternoon fishing. Can’t tell you the number of times people ignore this advice and end up spending the rest of the trip in their bunks.

“Don’t wait if you start to pull in a big one—ask me or Tony to help. It doesn’t work to try and be a hero and end up losing the gear or getting pulled overboard.

“In case of emergency, follow my instructions to the letter. Wear your lifejackets at all times.

“Bottom line: we’re here to have fun, so be safe, be smart, and we will all have a great time. Any questions?”

No one asked anything. “Okay, let’s get started.”

Tony, Jack’s stand-in assistant, stood nearby, arms crossed. He was short, wiry, but with a small beer belly. He wore a torn sleeved white tee shirt and sported a shaved head, scraggly goatee, and multiple tattoos, including a scorpion, which

crawled along the side of his neck. His stance was cocky, which only served to make him look punk. Jack sighed inwardly, gesturing to Tony to get rolling. Tony ambled over to help start the boat on its three-day journey.

Their vessel, a 50-foot yacht, the *Princess Rose*, was Jack's pride and joy. They cast off and slowly idled out of the harbor. The sky was a rich blue with the occasional white puffy cloud. With so little wind, the water was calm. It was a spectacular day to head out for sportfishing. Their destination—the waters off southern Baja, where the yellowtail was found in abundance, or so they hoped.

The three clients turned to each other as the boat got underway. They introduced themselves and engaged in small talk. They were put together by Captain Jack because they all wanted the same thing—three days of sport fishing on a chartered yacht. Although most charter groups are composed of friends and family, in this case, not so.

A couple of hours later, they were safely anchored not far from a well-known reef. Jack had set up the three guys with bait, lines, tackle, and sinkers, all designed for going after yellowtail. The water was gentle, and the silence supreme.

Not for the first time, he wondered if it was a mistake hiring Tony as his assistant. But it was last minute due to his long-time assistant's abrupt move away from the area, and he hadn't had the time to do a thorough search. Tony's attitude was poor. He seemed off-key toward the clients, almost contemptuous.

When Jack reminded Tony that morning that he would sleep on the sofa in the main salon that night, he'd acted angry and surprised, as if Jack hadn't already covered that when he interviewed him for the last-minute job. He'd claimed he knew sportfishing and boating well, but Jack had already caught him leaving out steps in their preparation for launch.

Thankfully, it was only a three-day fishing excursion. He could get by with Tony for this trip, but he'd have to find another backup assistant for the next one.

He was interrupted in his reverie by the older of the three guys, Paul.

"Captain," he greeted Jack, smiling, and offering his hand. The two men shook.

"You can call me Jack. Can I do something for you?"

“No, not really, but I have to say, this looks like a great boat. Can you tell me a little about it?” Jack rarely got an opportunity to talk about his pride and joy, and Paul seemed genuinely interested, so he took it.

“It’s a Silverton, 50-T Series, twin inboard diesel, built for sportfishing or cruising, depending.”

Jack had risked his entire meager fortune on the boat, buying it at auction in the depths of the Great Recession for \$289 thousand, a steal. Since then, he’d done fishing and cruising charters on a weekly basis, living in the garage apartment of a small cottage in Chula Vista, owned by Melanie, an attractive widow. She was generous with her home, opening the kitchen and main living areas for Jack’s use at any time, in return for which he did minor maintenance and repairs on top of rent. She seemed lonely and appreciative when Jack was around, grateful for his company and help around the property.

Jack didn’t need anything more—the boat was his life. It was paid for and heavily insured. It was the one thing he would regret losing. He began the tour for Paul, who offered a stream of questions about the boat.

Jack started with the cockpit. It was small but nicely finished, with stations for fishing, a small fold-away kitchen with sink, grill, and ice maker, plus seating. From there, they climbed the short stairs to the enclosed main salon, with leather sofas, burl wood appointments and tabletop. There was a granite countertop in the galley, with double sink, refrigerator/freezer, and cooktop. The salon also featured a built-in flat-screen TV with a hidden electrical panel.

They climbed to the bridge deck, which was enclosed, with twin helm seats and top-of-the-line instrumentation. Paul showed more interest here, asking more questions. He seemed to have both a fascination with and knowledge of mechanics. Next to the helm was a spacious enclosed seating area.

They stopped at one point, and Paul shifted a bit uncomfortably.

“I know I’ve taken up a lot of your time, but mechanical things fascinate me.” He shrugged. “My wife says I ask too many questions. That I make people uncomfortable. But we’re separated now,” he shared, looking down.

Jack said nothing. He didn't ask the obvious next question, silently declining to delve deeper. A brief, awkward silence stood between them.

"Hey, thanks for the tour," Paul said, looking up and brightening. "Your boat is great."

"No problem," said Jack. Paul nodded and wandered off.

When Jack first began taking people out on his boat, he engaged them in conversation, asking questions to elicit their stories. But over time, he'd realized his error. Most of them weren't there to openly share about their lives. Most of them were on the boat trying to forget.

Couples and friends were different. When he took them out, usually four to six people at a time, they knew each other, were familiar with one another's stories. They bantered easily and filled the air with conversation, mostly oblivious to Jack's presence. That freed him to focus on taking care of things in the background while they conversed with one another.

He was far more comfortable that way. Not being particularly extroverted in the first place, Jack found it tedious to have to engage in conversations, working hard to figure out the right questions to ask. Now, he focused on the boat, on the fishing, on safety, and on the water. No one ever seemed bothered by his long periods of silence, and that suited him perfectly.

Ben slowly raised his pole, patiently reeling in the line. They used chunk bait—mackerel and sardine—80 lb. line, heavy tackle, and 14-ounce sinkers. Their target was the large yellowtail jack, a beautiful fish with a distinctive yellow stripe, the love of sport fishers because of the fight they provided. Ben didn't care—yellowtail, any tail, any fish. He let the line drift.

He wasn't sure why he was here. He'd been feeling lost, drifting like the line in the water, and one day he picked up a brochure at a restaurant at the marina. What the heck. At least he'd be away for a while, and maybe he could forget, just for a couple of days.

They'd been at it for over an hour, and he hadn't had so much as a tug. He felt the gentle sway of the boat, heard the small slaps of the waves against the sides, and

he found it soothing. He used the downtime to look at the guy closest to him—Stuart. He'd been the first to start on the beer, and he took a pull from the bottle in his hand now.

Stuart glanced over at Ben and nodded. He seemed intense, though Ben couldn't say why that was his impression. Ben figured Stuart would be competitive about the fishing, trying to land the biggest fish the soonest.

He returned Stuart's nod and turned back to the water. He refocused his eyes on the most distant part of the horizon, allowing his vision to fuzz. His breathing slowed, and he felt almost sleepy.

"Any action?" It was Tony, the Captain's assistant. He'd approached Ben from behind. Tony carried himself with a swagger that Ben found irritating.

"Not yet," Ben told him.

Tony lingered. "This your first time out?"

"Yup."

"Want some help with that?" He smirked at Ben.

Ben was silent for a beat or two.

"I'm good," he said carefully.

"Yeah, first time out, guys find out just how strong those fish are, get their poles pulled out of their hands, look like idiots. I can show you how to cast and hold it, so that doesn't happen. I've been on hundreds of these fishing trips," Tony boasted.

"No, thanks, man," Ben said, turning away.

"Sure, okay," Tony huffed, and wandered off, approaching each of the men on the boat, probably asking the same question.

Ben turned his attention back to the water, the horizon, and the slow play of the line.

It had been a couple of months since the divorce from his wife, Michelle, was finalized. The recognition that the damage of his one-night stand was permanent was still a hard pill to swallow.

He blamed Michelle's sister, Liz, for the fact that he was now a divorced, single Dad, living separately from his children, forced to negotiate visitation with his ex-wife. It still seemed surreal. Yes, he'd screwed up, big-time. It was the worst kind of screw-up. But he might have had a shot at repairing the damage if it hadn't been for Liz.

After their separation, Ben had called Michelle every couple of hours for three days straight, but his calls went to voice mail. He left long, pleading messages, but got no return call. He sent desperate texts, long emails. No answer.

Finally, on the third day, Liz answered Michelle's landline home phone.

"Hello?"

"Liz. Um, I'm calling for Michelle."

"So?" The cold tone of her voice told Ben she knew everything. Liz had always been his champion. That was clearly over.

"Can you just put her on the line, Liz?"

"Nope."

"Liz, I need to speak to my wife, so put her on the line, now."

"Hey, Ben?"

"What?"

"She's not going to be your wife much longer, and if you have anything to say, you can tell me, or you can tell her lawyer."

"Put her on the line. I'll tell her myself."

Liz hung up.

It took three more calls, Liz answering and hanging up immediately, before Michelle took the phone away from Liz and spoke to Ben, barely.

"Hello, Ben." Her voice was flat, disengaged, almost a whisper.

“Michelle,” he breathed. “I miss you. Please, baby, let’s get together and talk. I don’t want to be separated from you.”

He spoke quickly now, filling in the silence with his fear and loneliness. “I know I screwed up, Michelle, but I love you. I never meant to hurt you. I want us back together. We can make this right, I promise you. Let me come over. See you. Hold you.”

She was silent for so long that he thought she’d hung up. Finally, she answered. He heard a sniffle.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” He heard her softly crying now.

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry. I know you’re hurt...”

“Hurt?” she sounded more energized now, angry. It was better to him than the sadness, which tore away great chunks from his chest.

“Of course, you are, and you have every right to be. I’m hurt, too, Michelle. I can’t sleep, I can barely eat. I just want to see you, so I can make this right again. I miss you, and I miss the kids. I want to be home again with you.”

“You are hurting. You can’t sleep. You want.” Flat, dull again. “Ben, I don’t really care how you feel. It seems to be all about you, doesn’t it? Well, no matter how much you are hurting, it’s a grain of sand compared to how I feel. You wrecked our life together.

“I wish you had never told me! If you had to go and screw someone else, why didn’t you keep it to yourself? Why on earth did you think I needed to hear that?”

Stunned, he tried to explain.

“I couldn’t live with it, baby, with the lie between us. We promised each other we would always be truthful.”

“Faithful, you jerk! We promised we would be faithful! Why didn’t you keep that promise?” She began crying, her voice fading away, and Ben was suddenly confronted with Liz’s voice again.

“Ben.”

“Liz? Is Michelle okay?” He paced around his motel room, frantic. “I’m coming over there!”

“Listen to me, Ben. Don’t you dare come over, and don’t call again and talk about your stupid feelings! Do you understand? No one gives a rat’s ass how you’re feeling! No one gives a shit how you’re doing. Just stay away!”

Shocked, Ben asked, “Were you listening, Liz? I’m trying to have a private conversation with my wife! Put her back on the phone, now.”

Liz laughed contemptuously. “Too bad. Like I said before, you can talk to me, or you can talk to her attorney.” She hung up. He felt like someone had blasted a shotgun through his chest.

After that, it was all downhill. Michelle had filed quickly and asked for everything. An attorney, she’d known exactly how to work the family court system in her favor, and Ben had chosen not to fight. She’d gotten everything she wanted; he got some of their assets and, most importantly, regular visitation with his children.

The only other thing he cared about was lost to him forever.

Ben felt a strong tug on the line. He began reeling in the line, and the tug turned into a monster pull. The reel bent into a deep arc. Ben launched into action instinctively, pulling with all his might.

The fish gave Ben a run for his money. He strained hard, trying to keep the rod in his hands, while gradually getting in a reel here and there. He pulled with all his might, suddenly needing to land this big fish. He *needed* a win.

It was slow going, and after a few minutes, he could feel the burn in his arms and shoulders. He stopped pulling and allowed slack for a moment.

Looking briefly behind him, Ben saw Tony watching. Tony mimicked reeling in the line, with a smirk. “Watch out, that fish ain’t dumb. He’s trying to break the line, wrap it around the reef or the rocks down there.”

Ben pulled again, hard, taking up the slack. It hurt like hell, but this time he didn't slow down. Slowly, he pulled the fish closer, and now it was close enough to pull into the boat.

Ben jerked his head, signaling he needed help. Now that his catch was so close, Ben realized he didn't have a clue about how to bring it onboard.

Tony took his time ambling over, then waited for the last possible moment, stepping in and gaffing, then helping to swing the fish—a large yellowtail, probably 35 pounds—into the boat, deftly separating the hook and line from the fish's mouth.

The fish was so beautiful, with a bright, lemon-yellow stripe running from eye to tail, that Ben momentarily felt regret about bringing it in, oddly empathetic about the plight of the sea creature that would soon be their dinner.

Tony told Ben to hold the fish up for a photo, but Ben shook his head no.

Captain Jack approached, eyed the fish, looked at Ben admiringly. "Nice catch," he said, nodding to Ben, "especially for your first time." He eyed Tony for a moment, then said, "Next time, make sure you're helping." He walked away.

Tony saluted Jack's back with an "Aye, aye, Cap'n!" and muttered something under his breath. He spat on the deck and sauntered away.

Stuart rolled his eyes at Tony's retreating back, catching Ben's eye. He held up a beer, silently offering one.

Ben shook his head and turned away, saying nothing. He went to bait his hook again, ignoring the pain in his arms and shoulders. He cast, and he waited, allowing his mind to wander as the line played out.

That evening, the men sat in the main lounge enjoying beer and cocktails. Their haul was modest—15 yellowtail, ranging from 15 to 25 pounds, Ben's first catch by far the largest. They caught other, smaller, fish, mostly bass and a couple barracuda, but threw those back.

Captain Jack cooked one of the smaller yellowtail, starting with a mix of peppers, onions, and vegetables, which he stir-fried with spices before adding the fish. Ben

declared the resulting savory meal was one of the best he'd tasted. The others concurred over huge mouthfuls of food.

Jack stayed in the background, cooking, cleaning, quietly observing.

Stuart spoke loudly, chugging one beer after the other. He was entertaining, Ben would give him that. He pantomimed his struggle to bring in his sixth small fish of the day, a bass, which he now pretended to haul up and at which he gaped.

"Might as well throw you back with all the rest," he laughed, then pointed at Ben. "And Ben over there throws out one line, pretty much ignores it, and in comes a monster yellow tail." His tone was humorous, friendly.

"That's nothing," said Tony, puffing up. "I once brought in an 80 pounder." Everyone turned to look at him. "It was the biggest yellowtail caught that entire season."

Stuart shook his head in disbelief. "Fishing stories...man. Are you sure it wasn't 150 pounds, Tony?" Everyone laughed, and Tony turned red.

"What do you know? You weren't there," Tony challenged Stuart. "Man, you don't know nothing," he said, now beet red in the face, muscles tensing visibly.

"Don't need to be there to know you're making it up," Stuart said, taking another pull on his beer. "Jerk," he added, not quite under his breath.

Tony looked ready to explode. Jack shot him a warning look.

Paul intervened, asking if anyone wanted to play cards. The tension ratcheted down, and they sat and began dealing cards. The three guests began a game of poker.

Tony sat apart from them, sulking and drinking.

Paul was friendly, bantering about the game as they played. Stuart responded with more of the same. Ben was mostly quiet, playing relentlessly. He had by far the best poker face, and that provoked friendly ribbing from Stuart. They played for over an hour, but eventually, Stuart folded his latest hand, yielding again to Ben.

Later, as they sat and shared the last drink of the night, the mood in the room turned mellow, and Stuart broached the question.

“So, you’re married?” He looked at Paul, who unconsciously twisted his wedding ring. Paul gazed off and said yes. “She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” he said softly, but there was no joy in his eyes. “We’re separated now.”

“That’s too bad. How long were you married? Any kids?” Stuart asked.

“15 years, and no children,” said Paul.

“So, what happened?” asked Stuart softly.

“Me. I’m what happened,” said Paul, looking down. “I blew up my marriage over not much of anything.”

Stuart whistled softly. “Sorry to hear that. Do you want to talk about it?”

Paul shook his head. “Not now, but thanks.”

Stuart turned to Ben, “And what’s your relationship status?”

Ben was silent at first.

“No comment,” he said. But his tone wasn’t harsh; it merely signaled that the sad, closed relationship chapter of his life was not available for inspection.

Stuart shrugged. “Whatever, man.”

Paul asked Stuart, “What about you?”

Stuart offered a grin. “Single and happy, man! Best time of my life.” The strain around his eyes, which he covered with another chug of beer, belied the statement.

Tony took up that refrain. “Me too. Shook off the last girlfriend six months ago after she gave me the old marriage ultimatum. Since then, it’s been boats and banging. Chicks love the feel of the water rocking the boat,” he held his hand out, mimicking the undulation, leering.

“Gets ‘em real horny. All I have to do is hit the bars near the marina, drop a few hints about having a boat, and before I know it, someone’s peeling off her panties.”

“That’s enough, Tony,” said Jack, shooting him a look. But Tony was undeterred, emboldened by alcohol.

“And what about you, *Captain Jack*? You’re unattached. I can just hear ‘em now. *Oh, Captain Jack! Take me to your boat!*” Tony laughed, but it was twisted laughter. No one else laughed. Paul looked away, clearly uncomfortable.

Jack turned away, heading downstairs to bed. He stopped just before going below and turned. “Get some sleep, everyone. 4:00 a.m. comes real early.” The others called it a night and headed down as well.

Day one of Ben’s short vacation, and so far, he felt no relief from the pain he’d been carrying around for months. Maybe day two would make a difference.

CHAPTER TWO

Wednesday, 8:15 a.m.

Tony stood on the bridge deck, ordered to stay put by Jack while he went below. He was resentful, disliking the boredom of sitting at the helm with nothing to do. It was a shit job. Why did he have to stand here anyway?

His orders were to watch the water, a job that didn’t make any sense. What was there to see? There was nothing but blue water and blue sky for as far as the eye could see. Their intel on weather showed nothing for hundreds of miles, and not much beyond that.

He wasn’t an idiot. But Jack sure treated him like one. *Keep an eye out for anything that looks out of place. There are floating containers in the ocean and other things. Our job is to keep ourselves and the passengers safe on this boat.*

Duh.

In the few months Tony had worked as a fishing hand, he’d never seen an issue. Boats went out, people fished and drank, and boats came back. He got paid for doing a whole lot of not much. Sweet deal. Except when he had to do something stupid and boring like this.

Jack was different than some of the other Captains. He seemed overly cautious, the type to cross all the t’s and dot the i’s in everything he did. What a waste of time. No one really gave a shit on these small-time fishing boats.

All these guys like Jack were the same to Tony—full of themselves, acting like they commanded a Navy battleship or something. He snorted to himself, shaking his head. He needed a smoke, bad, but Jack said he couldn't smoke on board in case it bothered one of the paying passengers. To hell with that—he was going to sneak one later anyway.

Tony pulled his cellphone out of his pocket. Too bad there was no internet signal. But he had enough downloaded content to keep him busy. Girls, girls, and more girls, in all kinds of poses, dressed in nothing. He grinned, rubbing himself, his eyes glued to the phone.

Far away, on the horizon, a dark swell appeared. To the untrained eye, it appeared to stand still, but any sailor who'd spent time on the open water would have known better—if they'd been watching. As the swell grew larger, Tony eyes remained glued to the tiny screen.

Suddenly, Jack was back, standing behind Tony.

"Tony!" Jack was pointing to the horizon, jabbing his finger. "Do you see that? It's headed directly for this boat!"

Tony leaped up, dropping his phone, shocked at the size of the wave approaching the boat. He'd never seen anything like it before.

"Get down below and get the lifeboat ready!" ordered Jack. For once in his life, Tony didn't balk at being told what to do and scrambled below.

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Unlikely Return is available on Amazon [here](#). It is also available through these retailers: Barnes and Noble Nook, Apple Books, and Kobo.