REBECCA YARROS

Bestselling author of ***Fourth Wing***

THE LAST LETTER

Can two broken souls help each other to heal?

PRAISE FOR *THE LAST LETTER*

"Yarros's novel is a deeply felt and emotionally nuanced contemporary romance…"

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

"Thanks to Yarros's beautiful, immersive writing, readers will feel every deep heartbreak and each moment of uplifting love in this tearjerker romance."

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"*The Last Letter* is a haunting, heartbreaking and ultimately inspirational love story."

—*InTouch Weekly*

"I cannot imagine a world without this story."

—Hypable

"A stunning, emotional romance. Put *The Last Letter* at the top of your to-read list!"

—Jill Shalvis, *NYT* bestselling author

"This story gripped me from start to finish. *The Last Letter* is poignant, heartfelt and utterly consuming. I loved it!"

—Mia Sheridan, *NYT* bestselling author

"*The Last Letter* is so much more than a romance. It's a testament to the strength of bonds forged from trauma and loyalty. It's an exploration of motherhood and the importance of family. But above all, it's a story of survival, forgiveness, and the healing power of unconditional love."

—Helena Hunting, *NYT* bestselling author

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Rebecca Yarros is the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author of over ten novels, including *The Things We Leave Unfinished* and *Great and Precious Things*. She is the recipient of the Colorado Romance Writers' Award of Excellence for *Eyes Turned Skyward* from her Flight and Glory series and can survive on coffee and peppermint bark when necessary.

Rebecca loves military heroes and has been blissfully married to her now-retired apache pilot for nineteen years. She's the mother of six children, ranging from first grade to law school, and is somehow surviving the teenage years with three of her four hockey-playing sons. When she's not writing, you can find her catching her sons' games at the hockey rink or sneaking in some guitar time. She lives in Colorado with her family, their stubborn English bulldogs, and a Maine coon kitten who rules them all. Having fostered, then adopted their youngest daughter, Rebecca is passionate about helping children in the foster system through her nonprofit, One October.

Want to know about Rebecca's next release? Join her mailing list! Or check her out online at www.rebeccayarros.com.

Copyrighted Material

ALSO BY REBECCA YARROS

FLIGHT & GLORY SERIES

Full Measures
Eyes Turned Skyward
Beyond What Is Given
Hallowed Ground
The Reality of Everything

THE RENEGADES SERIES

Wilder
Nova
Rebel

OTHER BOOKS BY REBECCA YARROS

The Things We Leave Unfinished
Great and Precious Things

Copyrighted Material

THE LAST LETTER

REBECCA YARROS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk

Penguin Random House UK

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Penguin Books
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Published by arrangement with Amara
an imprint of Entangled Publishing, LLC

Copyright © 2019 by Rebecca Yarros

The moral right of the author has been asserted

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Interior design by Heather Howland
Typeset by Six Red Marbles UK, Thetford, Norfolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House
Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781804992425

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

FSC www.fsc.org MIX Paper | Supporting responsible forestry FSC® C018179

To the kids who
wage war with cancer:

To David Hughes,
who beat his 10 percent chance
with 100 percent heart.

And for those like Beydn Swink,
whose souls were immeasurably
stronger than their bodies.
You are never forgotten.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER ONE

Beckett

Letter #1

Dear Chaos,

At least that's what my brother says they call you. I asked him if any of his buddies needed a little extra mail, and yours was the name I was given.

So hi, I'm Ella. I know the whole no-real-names-in-correspondence rule. I've been writing these letters just as long as he's been doing what he does…which I guess is what you do.

Now, before you put this letter aside and mumble an awkward "Thanks, but no thanks," like guys do, know that this is just as much for me as it is for you. Considering that I'd be able to have a safe place to vent away from the curious eyes of this tiny, nosy town, it would almost be like I'm using you.

So, if you'd like to be my ear, I'd be grateful, and in return, I'd be happy to be yours. Also, I make pretty awesome peanut butter cookies. If cookies didn't come with this letter, then go beat my brother, because he's stolen your cookies.

Where do I start? How do I introduce myself without it sounding like a singles ad? Let me assure you, I'm not looking for anything more than a pen pal—a very faraway pen pal—I promise. Military guys don't do it for me. Guys in general don't. Not that I don't like guys. I just don't have time for them. You know what I do have? Profound regret for writing this letter in pen.

Copyrighted Material

I'm the little sister, but I'm sure my brother already told you that. He's got a pretty big mouth, which means you probably know that I have two kids, too. Yes, I'm a single mom, and no, I don't regret my choices. Man, I get sick of everyone asking me that, or simply giving me the look that implies the question.

I almost erased that last line, but it's true. Also, I'm just too lazy to rewrite the whole thing.

I'm twenty-four and was married to the twins' sperm donor all of about three seconds. Just long enough for the lines to turn pink, the doctor to say there were two heartbeats, and him to pack in the quiet of the night. Kids were never his thing, and honestly, we're probably better for it.

If pen pal kids aren't your thing, I won't take offense. But no cookies. Cookies are for pen pals only.

If you're good with single parenthood in a pen pal, read on.

My twins are five, which, if you did the math correctly, means they were born when I was nineteen. After shocking our little town by deciding to raise them on my own, I just about gave it a coronary when I took over Solitude when my grandmother died. I was only twenty, the twins were still babies, and that B&B was where she'd raised us, so it seemed like a good place to raise my kids. It still is.

Let's see…Maisie and Colt are pretty much my life. In a good way, of course. I'm ridiculously overprotective of them, but I recognize it. I tend to overreact, to build a fortress around them, which keeps me kind of isolated, but hey, there are worse flaws to have, right? Maisie's the quiet

Copyrighted Material

one, and I can usually find her hiding with a book. Colt…well, he's usually somewhere he isn't supposed to be, doing something he isn't supposed to be doing. Twins can be crazy, but they'll tell you that they're twice the awesome.

Me? I'm always doing what I have to, and never what I really should be, or what I want to. But I think that's the nature of being a mom and running a business. Speaking of which, the place is waking up, so I'd better get this box sealed up and shipped.

Write back if you want. If you don't, I understand. Just know that there's someone in Colorado sending warm thoughts your way.

~ Ella

Today would have been a perfect time for my second curse word.

Usually, when we were on full-blown deployments, it got really *Groundhog Day*. Same crap, different day. There was almost a predictable, welcoming pattern to the monotony.

Not going to lie, I was a big fan of monotony.

Routine was predictable. Safe, or as safe as it was going to get out here. We were a month into another undisclosed location in another country we were never *in*, and routine was about the only thing comfortable about the place.

Today had been anything but routine.

Mission accomplished, as usual, but at a price. There was always a price, and lately, it was getting steep.

I glanced down at my hand, flexing my fingers because I could. Ramirez? He'd lost that ability today. Guy was going to be holding that new baby of his with a prosthetic.

Copyrighted Material

My arm flew, releasing the Kong, and the dog toy

streaked across the sky, a flash of red against pristine blue. The sky was the only clean thing about this place. Or maybe today just felt dirty.

Havoc raced across the ground, her strides sure, her focus narrowed to her target until—

"Damn, she's good," Mac said, coming up behind me.

"She's the best." I glanced over my shoulder at him before training my eyes on Havoc as she ran back to me. She had to be the best to get to where we were, on a tier-one team that operated without technically existing. She was a spec op dog, which was about a million miles above any other military working dog.

She was also mine, which automatically made her the best.

My girl was seventy pounds of perfect Labrador retriever. Her black coat stood out against the sand as she stopped just short of my legs. Her rump hit the ground, and she held the Kong out to me, her eyes dancing. "Last time," I said softly as I took it from her mouth.

She was gone before I even retracted my arm to throw.

"Word on Ramirez?" I asked, watching for Havoc to get far enough away.

"Lost his arm. Elbow down."

"Ffffff—" I threw the toy as far as I could.

"You could let it slip. Seems appropriate today." Mac scratched the month of beard he was rocking and adjusted his sunglasses.

"His family?"

"Christine will meet him at Landstuhl. They're sending in fresh blood. Forty-eight hours until arrival."

"That soon?" We really were that expendable.

"We're on the move. Meeting is in five."

Copyrighted Material

"Gotcha." Looked like it was on to the next undisclosed location.

Mac glanced down at my arm. "You get that looked at?"

"Doc stitched it up. Just a graze, nothing to get your panties in a twist over." Another scar to add to the dozens that already marked my skin.

"Maybe you need someone to get her panties in a twist over you in general."

I sent a healthy shot of side-eye to my best friend.

"What?" he asked with an exaggerated shrug before nodding toward Havoc, who pulled up again, just as excited as the first time I threw the Kong, or the thirty-sixth time. "She can't be the only woman in your life, Gentry."

"She's loyal, gorgeous, can seek out explosives, or take out someone trying to kill you. What exactly is she missing?" I took the Kong and rubbed Havoc behind her ear.

"If I have to tell you that, you're too far gone for my help."

We headed back into the small compound, which was really nothing more than a few buildings surrounding a courtyard. Everything was brown. The buildings, the vehicles, the ground, even the sky seemed to be taking on that hue.

Great. A dust storm.

"You don't need to worry about me. I've got no trouble when we're in garrison," I told him.

"Oh, I'm well aware, you Chris Pratt-looking asshole. But man"—he put his hand on my arm, stopping us before we could enter the courtyard where the guys had gathered—"you're not…attached to anyone."

"Neither are you."

"No, I'm not currently in a relationship. That doesn't mean I don't have attachments, people I care about and who care about me."

Copyrighted Material

I knew what he was getting at, and this wasn't the

time, the place, or the *ever*. Before he could take it any deeper, I slapped him on the back.

"Look, we can call in Dr. Phil, or we can get the hell out of here and move on to the next mission." Move on, that was always what came easiest to me. I didn't form attachments because I didn't want to, not because I wasn't capable. Attachments—to people, places, or things—were inconvenient or screwed you over. Because there was only one thing certain, and it was change.

"I'm serious." His eyes narrowed into a look I'd seen too many times in our ten years of friendship.

"Yeah, well I am, too. I'm fine. Besides, I'm attached to you and Havoc. Everyone else is just icing."

"Mac! Gentry!" Williams called from the door on the north building. "Let's go!"

"We're coming!" I yelled back.

"Look, before we go in, I left you something on your bed." Mac rubbed his hand over his beard—his nervous tell.

"Yeah, whatever it is, after this conversation I'm not interested." Havoc and I started walking toward the meeting. Already I felt the itch in my blood for movement, to leave this place behind and see what was waiting for us.

"It's a letter."

"From who? Everyone I know is in that room." I pointed to the door as we crossed the empty courtyard. That's what happened when you grew up bouncing from foster home to foster home and then enlisted the day you turned eighteen. The collection of people you considered worthy of knowing was a group small enough to fit in a Blackhawk, and today we were already missing Ramirez.

Like I said. Attachments were inconvenient.

"My sister."

Copyrighted Material

"I'm sorry?" My hand froze on the rusted-out door handle.

"You heard me. My little sister, Ella."

My brain flipped through its mental Rolodex. Ella. Blond, killer smile, soft, kind eyes that were bluer than any sky I'd ever seen. He'd been waving around pictures of her for the last decade.

"Gentry, come on. Do you need a picture?"

"I know who Ella is. Why the hell is there a letter from her on my bed?"

"Just thought you might need a pen pal." His gaze dropped to his dirty boots.

"A pen pal? Like I'm some fifth-grade project with a sister school?"

Havoc slid closer, her body resting against my leg. She was attuned to my every move, even the slightest changes in my mood. That's what made us an unstoppable team.

"No, not…" He shook his head. "I was just trying to help. She asked if there was anyone who might need a little mail and, since you don't have any family—"

Scoffing, I threw open the door and left his ass standing outside. Maybe some of that sand would fill up his gaping mouth. I hated the *F* word. People bitched about theirs all the time, constantly, really. But the minute they realized you didn't have one, it was like you were an aberration who had to be fixed, a problem that needed to be solved, or worse—pitied.

I was so far beyond anyone's pity that it was almost funny.

"All right, guys." Captain Donahue called our ten-member team—minus one—around the conference table. "Sorry to tell you that we're not headed home. We've got a new mission."

All those guys groaning—no doubt missing their wives, their kids—just reaffirmed my position on the attachment subject.

Copyrighted Material

"Seriously, New Kid?" I growled as the newbie scrambled to clean up the crap he'd knocked off the footlocker that served as my nightstand.

"Sorry, Gentry," he mumbled as he gathered up the papers. Typical All-American boy fresh out of operator training with no business being on this team yet. He needed another few years and way steadier hands, which meant he was related to someone with some pull.

Havoc tilted her head at him and then glanced up at me.

"He's new," I said softly, scratching behind her ears.

"Here," the kid said, handing me a stack of stuff, his eyes wide like I was going to kick him out of the unit for being clumsy.

God, I hoped he was better with his weapon than he was with my nightstand.

I put the stack on the spare inches of the bed that Havoc wasn't currently consuming. Sorting it took only a couple of minutes. Journal articles I was in the middle of reading on various topics, and— "Crap."

Ella's letter. I'd had the thing almost two weeks, and I hadn't opened it.

I hadn't thrown it away, either.

"Gonna open that?" Mac asked with the timing of an expert shit-giver.

"Why don't you ever swear?" New Kid asked at the same time.

Glaring at Mac, I slid the letter to the bottom of the stack and grabbed the journal article on top. It was on new techniques in search and rescue.

"Fine. Answer the new kid." Mac rolled his eyes and lay back on his bunk, hands behind his head.

"Yeah, my name is Johnson—"

"No, it's New Kid. Haven't earned a name yet," Mac corrected him.

Copyrighted Material

The kid looked like we'd just kicked his damn puppy,

so I relented.

"Someone once told me that swearing is a poor excuse for a crap vocabulary. It makes you look low class and uneducated. So I stopped." God knew I had enough going against me. I didn't need to sound like the shit I'd been through.

"Never?" New Kid asked, leaning forward like we were at a slumber party.

"Only in my head," I said, flipping to a new article in the journal.

"She really a working dog? She looks too…sweet," New Kid said, reaching toward Havoc.

Her head snapped up, and she bared her teeth in his direction.

"Yeah, she is, and yes, she'll kill you on command. So do us both a favor and don't ever try to touch her again. She's not a pet." I let her growl for a second to make her point.

"Relax," I told Havoc, running my hand down the side of her neck. Tension immediately drained out of her body, and she collapsed on my leg, blinking up at me like it had never happened.

"Damn," he whispered.

"Don't take it personally, New Kid," Mac said. "Havoc's a one-man woman, and you sure as hell aren't the guy."

"Loyal and deadly," I said with a grin, petting her.

"One day," Mac said, pointing to the letter, which had slid onto the bed next to my thigh.

"Today is not that day."

"The day you crack it open, you're going to kick yourself for not doing it sooner." He leaned over his bunk and came back up with a tub of peanut butter cookies, eating one with the sound effects of a porn.

Copyrighted Material

"Seriously."

"Seriously," he moaned. "So good."

I laughed and slid the letter back under the pile.

"Get some sleep, New Kid. We're all action tomorrow."

The kid nodded. "This is everything I ever wanted."

Mac and I shared a knowing look.

"Say that tomorrow night. Now get some shut-eye and stop knocking over my stuff or your call sign becomes Butterfinger."

His eyes widened, and he sank into his bunk.

Three nights later, New Kid was dead.

Johnson. He'd earned his name and lost his life saving Doc's ass.

I lay awake while everyone else slept, my eyes drifting to the empty bunk. He hadn't belonged here, and we'd all known it—expressed our concerns. He hadn't been ready. Not ready for the mission, the pace of our unit, or death.

Not that death cared.

The clock turned over, and I was twenty-eight.

Happy birthday to me.

Deaths always struck me differently when we were out on deployment. They usually fell into two categories. Either I brushed it off and we moved on, or my mortality was a sudden, tangible thing. Maybe it was my birthday, or that New Kid was little more than a baby, but this was the second type.

Hey, Mortality, it's me, Beckett Gentry.

Logically, I knew that with the mission over, we'd head home in the next couple of days, or on to the next hellhole. But in that moment, a raw need for connection gripped me in a way that felt like a physical pressure in my chest.

Not attachment, I told myself. That shit was trouble.

Copyrighted Material

But to be connected to another human in a way that wasn't reserved for the brothers I served with, or even

my friendship with Mac, which was the closest I'd ever gotten to family.

In a move of sheer impulsivity, I grabbed my flashlight and the letter from where I'd tucked it into a journal on mountaineering.

Balancing the flashlight on my shoulder, I ripped open the letter and unfolded the lined notebook paper full of neat, feminine scroll.

I read the letter once, twice…a dozen times, placing her words with the pictures of her face I'd seen over the years. I imagined her sneaking a few moments in the early morning to get the letter written, wondered what her day had been like. What kind of guy walked out on his pregnant wife? *An asshole.*

What kind of woman took on twins and a business when she was still a kid herself? *A really damn strong one.*

A strong, capable woman who I needed to know. The yearning that grabbed ahold of me was uncomfortable and undeniable.

Keeping as quiet as possible, I took out a notebook and pen.

A half hour later, I sealed the envelope and then hit Mac in the shoulder with it.

"What the hell?" he snapped at me, rolling over.

"I want my cookies." I enunciated every word with the seriousness I usually reserved for Havoc's commands.

He laughed.

"Ryan, I'm serious." Whipping out the first name meant business.

"Yeah, well, you snooze, you lose your cookies." He smirked and settled back into his bunk, his breathing deep and even a few seconds later.

"Thank you," I said quietly, knowing he couldn't hear me. "Thank you for her."

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER TWO

Ella

Letter #1

Ella,

You're right, your brother outright ate those cookies. But in his defense, I waited too long to open your letter. I figure if we actually do this, we should be honest, right?

So one, I'm not good with people. I could give you a bunch of excuses, but really, I'm just not good with them. Chalk it up to saying the wrong thing, being blunt, or just not seeing the need for mindless chatter or any other number of things. Needless to say, I've never written letters to…anyone, now that I think about it.

Second, I like that you write in pen. It means you don't go back and censor yourself. You don't overthink, just write what you mean. I bet you're like that in person, too—saying what you think.

I don't know what to tell you about me that wouldn't get blacked out by censors, so how about this: I'm twenty-eight as of about five minutes ago, and other than my friends here, I have zero connections to the world around me. Most of the time I'm good with that, but tonight I'm wondering what it's like to be you. To have so much responsibility, and so many people depending on you. If I could ask you one question, that would be it: What's it like to be the center of someone's universe?

V/R,

Chaos

Copyrighted Material

I read the letter for the third time since it came this morning, my fingers running over the choppy handwriting comprised of all capital letters. When Ryan had said there was someone in his unit he was hoping I'd take on as a pen pal, I thought he'd lost his mind.

The guys he served with were usually about as open as a locked gun safe. Our father had been the same way. Honestly, I'd figured when weeks had passed without a reply, the guy had snubbed my offer. Part of me had been relieved—it wasn't like I didn't have enough on my plate. But there was something to be said for the possibilities of a blank piece of paper. To be able to empty my thoughts to someone I would never meet was oddly freeing.

Given his letter, I wondered if he felt the same.

How could someone make it to twenty-eight without having…someone, anyone in any capacity? Ry had said the guy was tight-lipped and had a heart as approachable as a brick wall, but Chaos just seemed… lonely.

"Mama, I'm bored." Maisie said from next to me, kicking her feet under the chair.

"Well, you know what?" I asked in a singsong voice, tucking the letter away inside my purse.

"Only boring people are bored?" she replied, blinking up at me with the biggest blue eyes in the world. She tilted her head and screwed up her nose, making wrinkles at the top. "Maybe they wouldn't be so boring if they had stuff to do."

I shook my head, but smiled, and offered her my iPad.

"Be careful with it, okay?" We couldn't afford to replace it, not with three of the guest cabins getting new roofs this week. I'd already sold off twenty-five acres at

Copyrighted Material

the back of the property line to finance the repairs that had been long coming and mortgaged the property to the hilt to finance the expansion.

Maisie nodded, her blond ponytail bobbing as she swiped the iPad open to find her favorite apps. How the heck a five-year-old navigated the thing better than I did was a mystery. Colt was a wiz on the thing, too, just not quite as tech savvy as Maisie. Mostly because he was too busy climbing whatever he wasn't supposed to be.

My gaze darted up to the clock. Four p.m. The doc was already a half hour late for the appointment he'd asked *me* for. I knew Ada didn't mind watching Colt, but I hated having to ask her. She was in her sixties and, while still spry, Colt was anything but easy to keep up with. She called him "lightning in a bottle," and she wasn't far off.

Maisie absentmindedly rubbed the spot on her hip she'd been complaining about. The complaint had gone from a twinge, to an ache, to the ever-present hurt that never quite left her.

Just before I was about to lose my temper and head for the receptionist, the doc knocked before coming in.

"Hey, Ella. How are you feeling, Margaret?" Doctor Franklin asked with a kind smile and a clipboard.

"Maisie," she corrected him with serious eyes.

"Of course," he agreed with a nod, shooting me a slight smile. No doubt I was still five years old in his eyes, considering Dr. Franklin had been my pediatrician, too. His hair had more gray, and there was an extra twenty pounds around his middle, but he was still the same as he was when my grandmother brought me to this office. Nothing much changed in our little town of Telluride. Sure, ski season came, the tourists flooding our streets with their Land Rovers, but the tide always receded, leaving behind the locals to resume life as usual.

Copyrighted Material

"How's the pain today?" he asked, coming down to her level.

She shrugged and focused on the iPad.

I tugged it free of her little hands and arched an eyebrow at her disapproving face.

She sighed, the sound way older than a five-year-old's, but turned back to Dr. Franklin. "It always hurts. It hasn't not hurt in forever."

He looked over at me for clarification.

"It's been at least six weeks."

He nodded, then frowned as he stood, flipping the papers on the board.

"What?" Frustration twisted my stomach, but I bit my tongue. It wasn't going to do Maisie any good for me to lose my temper.

"The bone scan results are clean." He leaned against the exam table and rubbed his hand over the back of his neck.

My shoulders sagged. It was the third test they'd run on Maisie and still nothing.

"Clean is good, right?" she asked.

I forced a smile for her benefit and handed the iPad back to her. "Honey, why don't you play for a sec while I sneak a word with Dr. Franklin in the hallway?"

She nodded, eagerly getting back to whatever game she'd been in the middle of.

I met Dr. Franklin in the hall, leaving the door open just a smidge so I could keep an ear on Maisie.

"Ella, I don't know what to tell you." He folded his arms across his chest. "We've run X-rays, the scan, and if I thought she'd lie still long enough for an MRI, we could try that. But in all honesty, we're not seeing anything physically wrong with her."

The sympathetic look he gave me grated on my last nerve.

Copyrighted Material

"She's not making this up. Whatever pain she's in is

very real, and something is causing it."

"I'm not saying the pain isn't real. I've seen her often enough to know that something is up. Has anything changed at home? Any new stressors? I know it can't be easy on you running that place by yourself with two little kids to take care of, especially at your age."

My chin rose a good inch, just like it did any time someone brought up my kids and my age in the same sentence.

"The brain is a very powerful—"

"Are you suggesting that this is psychosomatic?" I snapped. "Because she's having trouble *walking* now. Nothing has changed in our house. It's the same as it has been since I brought them home from this very hospital, and she's not under any undue stress in kindergarten, I assure you. This is not in her head; it's in her hip."

"Ella, there's nothing there," he said softly. "We've looked for breaks, ligament tears, everything. It might be a really bad case of growing pains."

"That is not growing pains! There's something you're missing. I looked on the internet—"

"That was your first mistake." He sighed. "Looking on the internet will convince you that a cold is meningitis and a leg pain is a giant blood clot ready to dislodge and kill you."

My eyes widened.

"It's not a blood clot, Ella. We did an ultrasound. There's *nothing* there. We can't fix a problem that we don't see."

Maisie wasn't making it up. It wasn't in her head. It wasn't some symptom of being born to a young mom or not having a dad in the picture. She was in pain, and I couldn't help her.

Copyrighted Material

I was completely and utterly powerless.

"Then I guess I'll take her home."

I savored the walk from the county road back to the main house. Getting the mail this time of year was always my own little way of sneaking out, and I enjoyed it even more now that I had Chaos's letters to look forward to. I was expecting number six any day now. The late October air was brisk, but we were still a good month away from the slopes opening. Then my small moments of serenity would be swallowed by the torrent of bookings.

Thank God, because we really needed the business. Not that I didn't enjoy the slower pace of fall after the summer hikers went home, but it was our winters that kept Solitude in the black. And with our new, painful mortgage payments, the income was necessary.

But for now, this was perfect. The aspens had turned gold and were beginning to lose their leaves, which currently covered the tree-lined drive from the road to the house. It wasn't far, only a hundred yards or so, but it was just enough distance to give visitors that feeling of seclusion they were looking for.

Our main house held a few guest rooms, the professional kitchen, dining room, and game rooms, plus a separate, small residential wing where I lived with the kids. It always teemed with life when someone wanted company. But Solitude got her name, and her reputation, from the fifteen secluded cabins that dotted our two hundred acres. If someone wanted the convenience of luxury accommodations and proximity to civilization, while still getting away from it all, we were the perfect spot.

Now if only I could afford the advertising to get the cabins booked. You could build it all day long; people only came if they knew you existed.

Copyrighted Material

"Ella, you busy?" Larry asked from the front porch.

His eyes danced under bushy gray eyebrows that seemed to curl in every direction.

"Nope. What's up?" I fidgeted with the mail as I walked up the steps, pausing on a board that might need to be replaced. The thing about rebranding yourself as a luxury resort was that people expected perfection.

"There's something waiting for you on the table."

"Waiting?" I ignored his grin—the man was never going to be a poker player—and headed inside.

I kicked off my boots and slid them under one of the benches in the foyer. The newly refinished hardwood was warm under my feet as I crossed in front of the receptionist's desk.

"Good walk?" Hailey looked up from her phone and smiled.

"Just got the mail, nothing special." I gripped the stack of letters in my hand, prolonging the torture for a few more moments. Besides, that top envelope was a bill from Dr. Franklin, which I wasn't in a hurry to open.

It had been almost a month since I'd taken Maisie to see him, and there was still no diagnosis for her worsening pain. This was just another bill to remind me that I'd dropped us to the lowest insurance premiums possible to get us through this year.

"Uh-huh. You're not looking for a letter, are you?" Her brown eyes were wide with mock innocence.

"I shouldn't have told you about him." She was never going to let me hear the end of it, but I honestly didn't mind. Those letters were the one thing I had just for me. The one place where I could be open and honest without judgment or expectation.

"Hey, it's better than you living vicariously through my love life."

"Your love life gives me whiplash. Besides, we're just writing. There's nothing romantic. Ryan needed a favor. That's all."

Copyrighted Material

"Ryan. When is he coming home again?" She sighed that dreamy sigh most of the local girls let out whenever my brother was mentioned.

"Should be a little after Christmas, and seriously, you were what? Twelve when he left to join up?"

Hailey was only two years younger than me, but I felt infinitely older. Maybe I'd aged ten years per kid, or running Solitude had prematurely shoved me into middle age, but whatever it was, there was a lifetime between us.

"Stop dawdling!" Larry urged, nearly jumping up and down.

"What's the big deal?"

"Ella, get in here!" Ada called from the dining room.

"Both of you are after me now?" I shook my head at Larry but followed him into the dining room.

"Ta-da!" Ada said, waving her arms in a flourish toward the dark farmhouse-style table.

I followed her motions, finding the magazine I'd been waiting for sitting there, its bright-blue cover standing out against the wood.

"When did it get here?" My voice dropped.

"This morning," Ada answered.

"But…" I held up the stack of mail.

"Oh, I just left all that in there. I wasn't going to deprive you of your favorite time of day."

A few quiet, tense moments passed while I stared at the magazine. *Mountain Vacations: Colorado's Best of 2019. Winter edition.*

"It's not going to bite," Ada said, scooting the magazine toward me.

"No, but it could make or break us."

"Read it, Ella. Lord knows I already did," she said, pushing her glasses back up her nose.

Copyrighted Material

I snatched the magazine off the table, dropping the pile of mail in its place, and thumbed through it.

"Page eighty-nine," Ada urged.

My heart pounded, and my fingers seemed to stick on every page, but I made it to page eighty-nine.

"Number eight, Solitude, Telluride, Colorado!" My hands shook as I took in the glossy photographs of my property. I knew they'd sent someone to review us but hadn't known when.

"We've never been in the top twenty, and you just landed in the top ten!" Ada pulled me into a hug, her larger frame dwarfing mine. "Your grandmother would be so very proud. All the renovations you've done, everything you've sacrificed. Heck, I'm proud of you, Ella." She pulled back, thumbing the tears from her eyes. "Well, don't just stand there blubbering, read!"

"She's not the one blubbering, woman," Larry said, coming around to hug his wife. These two were just as much Solitude as I was. They'd been with my grandmother since she'd opened, and I knew they'd stay with me as long as they could.

"'Solitude is a hidden gem. Nestled in the San Juan Mountains, the unique resort boasts not only a family feel in the main house, but over a dozen newly refurbished luxury cabins for those unwilling to trade privacy for proximity to the slopes. Only a ten-minute drive to some of the best skiing Colorado has to offer, Solitude offers you just that—a haven from the tourist-heavy Mountain Village. This B&B feels more like a resort and is perfect for those seeking the best of both worlds: impeccable service and the feeling of being alone in the mountains. It is the pure Colorado experience.'"

They loved us! We were a top ten Colorado B&B! I clutched the magazine to my chest and let joy wash through me. Moments like this didn't come every day, or even every decade, it seemed, and this one was mine.

Copyrighted Material

"The pure Colorado experience is what exists when

the tourists go home," Larry muttered but grinned.

The phone rang, and I heard Hailey answering it in the background.

"I bet the reservations are about to book solid!" Ada sang as Larry danced her around the perimeter of the table.

With a review like that, it was a sure bet. We were going to be slammed, and soon. We'd be able to pay the mortgage and the construction loan for the planned cabins on the south side.

"Ella, the school's on the phone," Hailey called out.

I dropped the magazine with the other mail and headed for the phone.

"This is Ella MacKenzie," I said, prepping to hear whatever Colt had done to aggravate his teacher.

"Mrs. MacKenzie, good. This is Nurse Roman at the elementary school." There was more than a tone of worry in her voice, so I didn't bother to correct her on my marital status.

"Everything okay?"

"I'm afraid that Maisie is here. She collapsed on the playground, and her temperature is at 104.5."

Collapsed. Temperature. A deep, nauseating feeling that could only be described as foreboding gripped my belly. Dr. Franklin had missed something.

"I'll be right there."

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER THREE

Beckett

Letter #6

Dear Chaos,

Here's another batch of cookies. Hide them from my brother. No, I'm not kidding. He's a shameless thief when it comes to these. It's our mother's recipe, well, really our grandmother's, and he's an addict. After we lost our parents—our Father in Iraq and Mom to a car accident a month later, I'm sure he's told you—these were always in the kitchen, waiting after school, after heartbreaks, after football game wins and losses. They're pretty much like home to him.

And now you have a piece of my home with you.

You asked me something in your first letter, what was that? A month ago? Anyway, you asked what it was like to be the center of someone's universe. I didn't know how to answer then, but I think I do now.

I'm not the center of anyone's universe, honestly. Not even my kids'. Colt is fiercely independent, and he's pretty sure he's been put in charge of personally seeing to Maisie's safety—and mine. Maisie is confident, but her quietness can be mistaken for shyness. Funny thing? She's not shy. She's a ridiculously good judge of character and can spot a lie a mile away. I wish I had the same ability, because if there's one thing I can't stand, it's a lie. Maisie has incredible instincts about people that she definitely didn't get

Copyrighted Material

from me. If she's not talking to you it's not because she's a wilting wallflower, it's because she simply doesn't think you're worth her time. She's been like that since she was a baby. She likes you or she doesn't. Colt…he gives everyone a chance, and a second chance, a third…you get the picture.

I guess he gets that from his uncle, because I can admit that I've never been able to give second chances when it comes to hurting the people I love. As embarrassed as I am to admit, I still haven't forgiven my father for leaving us—for the look on my brother's face, or that easy lie that he was just going TDY for a few weeks…but then never coming back. For choosing to divorce my mother instead of the army. Heck, it's been fourteen years and I still haven't forgiven the officer who gave the order that got him killed—for breaking my mother's heart a second time. I really hate that about myself. Yeah, Colt definitely gets his soft heart from my brother, and I hope he never loses it.

At five years old, my kids are already better people than I will ever be, and I'm ridiculously proud of them.

But I'm not the center of their universe. I'm more like their gravity. Right now I've got them locked down tight, their feet on the ground, their path obvious. It's my job to keep them there, close to everything that keeps them safe. But as they get bigger, I get to loosen up just a little, stop tugging so hard. Eventually, I'll get to set them free to fly, and I'll only reel them in when they ask, or they need it. Hell, I'm twenty-four and sometimes I still need to be reeled in. I honestly don't want to be the center, though. Because what happens when the center doesn't

Copyrighted Material

exist anymore?

Everything…everyone falls out of orbit.

At least, that's what happened to me.

So I'm good with gravity. After all, it controls the tides, the motion of everything, and even makes life possible. And then when they're ready to fly, maybe they'll find someone else who keeps their feet on the ground. Or maybe they'll fly with them.

I hope it's a little bit of both.

So do I get to know why they call you Chaos? Or is that as secret as your picture?

~ Ella

"Chaos, you wanna share?" Williams asked over comms, nodding toward the letter.

"Nope." I folded letter number six and slipped it inside my breast pocket as the helo carried us to the op. Havoc was still between my knees. She wasn't a huge fan of helicopters, or the rappelling we were about to have to do, but she was steady.

"You sure?" Williams teased again, his smile bright against his camo-darkened skin.

"Absolutely." He wasn't getting the letter or a cookie. I wasn't sharing any part of Ella. She was the first person who had ever been only mine, even if it was just through letters. That wasn't a feeling I wanted to part with.

"Leave him alone," Mac said from next to me. He glanced to my pocket. "She's good for you."

I almost blew him off. But what he'd given me was a gift, not just in Ella but in the connection to more than just the guys, the mission. He'd given me a window to normal life outside the box I'd confined myself in for the last ten years. So I gave him the truth.

Copyrighted Material

"Yeah." I nodded. That was all I could give him.

He slapped my shoulder with a grin, but he didn't say "I told you so."

"Ten minutes out," Donahue called out over the comms.

"What's it like? Telluride?" I asked Mac.

His eyes took on that wistful look I used to roll my eyes at. Now I was oddly desperate to know, to picture the tiny town she lived in.

"It's beautiful. In the summer it's lush and green, and the mountains rise up above you like they're trying to take you closer to heaven. In the fall, they look dipped in gold when the aspen turn…like right now. In winter, it's a little busy because of the ski season, but the snow falls around Solitude, and it's like everything is blanketed in new starts. Then spring comes, and the roads turn muddy, the tourists leave, and everything is born again, just as beautiful as last year." He let his head drop back against the UH-60's seat.

"You miss it."

"Every day."

"Then why are you still here? Why did you leave?"

He rolled his head toward me with a sad smile. "Sometimes you have to leave so you can know what it is you left. You don't really value something until you've lost it."

"And if you never had it?" It was more of a clinical question. I'd never been attached to a place or felt a sense of home. I'd never stayed anywhere long enough for that feeling to take root. Or maybe I wasn't capable of having roots. Maybe they'd been sliced from me so often that they simply refused to grow.

"Tell you what, Gentry. You and me. Once this deployment is over, let's take some leave, and I'll show you around Telluride. I know you can ski, so we'll hit the slopes, then the bars. I might even let you meet Ella, but

Copyrighted Material

you'll have to get through Colt."

Ella. We only had another couple of months on this QRF detail. Then it was goodbye to Quick Reaction Force and hello to a little downtime, which I usually despised but now felt mildly curious about. But Ella? That curiosity wasn't mild in the least. I wanted to see her, talk to her, find out if the woman who wrote the letters really existed in a world that wasn't paper or perfect.

"I'd like that," I answered slowly. He'd offered countless times, but I'd never taken him up on it.

His eyebrows rose as his wide grin became almost comical. "Want to see Telluride, or Ella?"

"Both," I answered truthfully.

He nodded as the five-minute warning came over the comms. Then he leaned in so only I could hear him, not that the others had a shot over the rotors anyway.

"You'd be good for each other. If you ever let your feet stand in one location long enough for something to grow."

Worthless. You ruin everything.

I shoved my mother's words out of my head and focused on now. Slipping into *then* was a disaster waiting to happen, so I slammed that door shut in my head.

"I'm not good for anyone," I told Mac. Then, before he could dig any deeper, I ran a check on Havoc's harness, making sure she was clipped in tight so I didn't lose her on the way down.

Gravity could be a bitch.

Ella's comments on that subject ran through my head. What would it be like to have someone ground you? Was it comforting to feel that safety? Or was it suffocating? Was it the kind of force you relied on or the type you fled?

Copyrighted Material

Were there really people who stuck around long

enough to be considered that dependable? If there were, I'd never met one. It was why I never bothered with relationships. Why the hell would you sign yourself up to invest in someone who would eventually say you were too flawed, too complicated, to keep around?

Even Mac—my best friend—was contractually obligated to be in the same unit I was, and even his friendship had limits, and I made sure to never test those lines. I knew in the pit of my stomach that he'd burn anyone to the ground who hurt Ella.

Ten minutes later we touched down, and that was the only gravity I had the time to think about.

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER FOUR

Ella

Letter #6

Ella,

Thank you for the cookies. And yeah, your brother stole them while I was in the shower. You think he'd be three hundred pounds by now.

I thought about what you said about gravity.

I've never really had that—anything tethering me anywhere. Maybe when I joined the army, but really that was more about my affinity for the unit than it was for anywhere or anyone. Until I met your brother, and they started pushing us through selection. Unfortunately, I am overly fond of him, as is most of our unit. It's only unfortunate because sometimes he can be a real pain in the rear.

Why do they call me Chaos? That's a long, unflattering story. I promise I'll tell it to you one day. Let's just say it involves a bar brawl, two really angry bouncers, and a misunderstanding between your brother and a woman he mistook for a prostitute. She wasn't.

She was our new commanding officer's wife. Whoops.

Maybe I'll make him tell you that story instead.

You mentioned in your last letter that Maisie wasn't feeling well. Did the docs get to the bottom of it? I can't imagine how hard that has to be for you. How is Colt doing? Did he start

Copyrighted Material

those snowboarding lessons yet?

Gotta go, they're rounding us up, and I want to make sure I get this in the mail.

Catch you later,

~ Chaos

The only sounds in the hospital room were the thoughts screaming inside my head, begging to be let free. They demanded answers, shouted to find every doctor in this hospital and make them listen. Knowing Telluride wasn't going to look any deeper, I'd brought her an hour and a half away to the bigger hospital in Montrose.

It was almost midnight. We'd been here since just after noon, and both the kids were fast asleep. Maisie was curled in on herself, dwarfed by the size of the hospital bed, a few leads sending her vitals to the monitors. Thank God they'd turned off the incessant beeping. Just seeing the beautiful rhythm of her heart was enough for me.

Colt was stretched out on the couch, his head in my lap, his breathing deep and even. Although Ada had offered to take him home, he'd refused, especially while Maisie had a death grip on his hand. They never could stand to be separated for long. I ran my fingers over his blond hair, the same nearly white shade as Maisie's. How similar their features looked. How different their little souls were.

A soft click sounded as the door opened only enough for a doctor to poke his head in.

"Mrs. MacKenzie?"

I put up one finger, and the doctor nodded, backing away and closing the door softly.

As quietly as I could, I moved Colt off my lap, replacing my warmth with a pillow and my jacket over his little body.

Copyrighted Material

"Is it time to go?" he asked, snuggling deeper into the couch.

"No, bud. I need to talk to the doctor. You stay here and watch over Maisie, okay?"

Slowly, glazed-over blue eyes opened to meet mine. He was still more than half asleep.

"I've got this."

"I know you do." I grazed his temple with my fingers.

With sure steps and very unsure fingers, I got the door open and shut behind me without waking Maisie.

"Mrs. MacKenzie?"

I scanned the guy's badge. Doctor Taylor.

"Actually, I'm not married."

He blinked rapidly and then nodded. "Right. Of course. My apologies."

"What do you know?" I pulled the sides of my sweater together, like the wool could function as some kind of armor.

"Let's go down the hall. The nurses are right here, so the kids are fine," he assured me, already leading me to a glass-walled area that looked to serve as a conference room.

There were two other doctors waiting.

Doctor Taylor pointed me to a seat, and I took it. The men in the room looked serious, their smiles not reaching their eyes, and the guy on the right couldn't seem to stop clicking his pen.

"So, Ms. MacKenzie," Doctor Taylor began. "We ran some blood tests on Margaret, as well as drained some fluid from her hip earlier, where we found infection."

I shifted in my seat. Infection…that was easy.

"So antibiotics?"

"Not exactly." Doctor Taylor's eyes shot up toward the door, and I glanced over to see a woman in her midforties leaning against the doorframe. She was classically beautiful, her dark skin as flawless as her

Copyrighted Material

French twist updo. I was suddenly very aware of my state of dishevelment but managed to keep my hands off my no-longer-cute messy bun.

"Dr. Hughes?"

"Just observing. I saw the girl's chart when I came on shift."

Dr. Taylor nodded, took a deep breath, and turned his attention back to me.

"Okay, if she has an infection in her hip, that would explain the leg pain and the fever, right?" I folded my arms across my stomach.

"It could, yes. But we've found an anomaly in her blood work. Her white counts are alarmingly elevated."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, this is Dr. Branson, and he's from ortho. He'll help us with Margaret's hip. And this…" Dr. Taylor swallowed. "This is Dr. Anderson. He's from oncology."

Oncology?

My gaze swung to meet the aging doctor's, but my mouth wouldn't open. Not until he said the words his specialty had been called in for.

"Ms. MacKenzie, your daughter's tests indicate that she may have leukemia…"

His mouth continued to move. I saw it take shape, watched the animations of his facial features, but I didn't hear anything. It was like he'd turned into Charlie Brown's teacher and everything was coming through a filter of a million gallons of water.

And I was drowning.

Leukemia. Cancer.

"Stop. Wait." I put my hands out. "I've had her at the pediatrician at least three times in the last six weeks. They told me there was nothing, and now you're saying it's leukemia? That's not possible! I did everything."

Copyrighted Material

"I know. Your pediatrician didn't know what to look for, and we're not even certain it is leukemia. We'll need

to take a bone marrow sample to confirm or rule it out."

Which doctor said that? Branson? No, he was ortho, right?

It was the cancer doctor. Because my baby needed to be tested for cancer. She was just down the hall and had no clue that a group of people were sentencing her to hell for a crime she'd never committed. Colt… God, what was I going to tell him?

I felt a hand squeeze mine and looked over, my head on autopilot, to see Dr. Hughes in the seat next to me. "Can we call someone? Maybe Maisie's dad? Your family?"

Maisie's dad had never so much as bothered to see her.

My parents had been dead fourteen years.

Ryan was half a world away doing God-knew-what.

Ada and Larry were no doubt asleep in the main house of Solitude.

"No. There's no one."

I was on my own.

The scans began in the morning. I pulled a small notebook from my purse and began to jot down notes of what the doctors said, what tests were being run. I couldn't seem to absorb it all. Or perhaps the enormity of it was simply too much to take in.

"Another test?" Colt asked, squeezing my hand as the doctors drew more blood from Maisie.

"Yep." I forced a smile, but it didn't fool him.

"We just need to see what's going on with your sister, little man," Dr. Anderson said from where he stood perched at Maisie's bedside.

"You've already looked in her bones. What else do you want?" Colt snapped.

Copyrighted Material

"Colt, why don't we go grab some ice cream?" Ada asked from the corner. She'd arrived early this morning,

determined that I not be alone.

I could have been in a room with a dozen people I knew—I still would have been alone.

"Come on, we'll grab some for Maisie, too." She held out her hand, and I nodded to Colt.

"Go ahead. We're not going anywhere for a while."

Colt looked to Maisie, who smiled. "Strawberry."

He nodded, taking his duty with all seriousness, then gave Dr. Anderson another glare for good measure before leaving with Ada.

I held Maisie's hand while they finished the draw. Then I curled up next to her on the bed and switched on cartoons, holding her small body against mine.

"Am I sick?" She looked up at me without fear or expectation.

"Yeah, baby. I think you might be. But it's too early to worry, okay?"

She nodded and focused back on whatever show Disney Junior was airing.

"Then it's good that I'm in a hospital. They make you better in hospitals."

I kissed her forehead. "That, they do."

"It's not leukemia," Dr. Anderson told me as we stood in the hallway later that night.

"It's not?" Relief raced through me, the physical feeling palpable, like blood returning to a limb too long asleep.

"No. We don't know what it is, though."

"It could still be cancer?"

"It could. We're not finding anything other than the elevated white counts, though."

"But you're going to keep looking."

He nodded, but the sheen of certainty he'd had in his eyes when he'd thought it was leukemia was gone. He

Copyrighted Material

didn't know what we were dealing with, and he obviously didn't want to tell me that.

Day three and four passed with more tests. Less certainty.

Colt grew restless but refused to leave his sister's side, and I didn't have the heart to make him go. They'd never been separated for more than a day in their lives. I wasn't sure they knew how to survive as individuals when they thought of themselves collectively.

Ada brought clean clothes, took Colt for walks, kept me up to date on the business. How odd it was that my obsession with Solitude had been my number three priority behind Colt and Maisie for the last five years, but at this moment felt utterly unimportant.

Days blended together, and my fingers were damn near raw from the internet searching I'd done since Dr. Anderson dropped the *C* word. Of course they'd told me to stay off the net.

Yeah, right.

I couldn't remember a damn thing they said half the time. No matter how hard I tried to concentrate, it was as if my brain had shields up and was only taking in what it thought I could handle. Using the internet filled in the gaps that my memory and my notebook couldn't.

On the fifth day, we gathered in the conference room once again, but this time I had Ada next to me.

"We still don't know what's causing it. We've tested for all the usual culprits, and they've come back negative."

"Why doesn't that sound like a good thing?" Ada asked. "You're saying you haven't found cancer, but you sound disappointed."

"Because there's something there. They just can't find it," I said, my voice turning sharp. "The same as Dr. Franklin. Maisie said she hurt, and she was sent home with a diagnosis of growing pains. Then they called it

Copyrighted Material

psychosomatic. Now you're telling me that her blood says one thing, her bones say another, and you're just out of ideas."

The men had the good sense to look embarrassed. They should be. They'd gone to years and years of school for this very moment, and they were failing.

"Well, what are you going to do? Because there has to be something. You're not going to send my little girl home."

Dr. Anderson opened his mouth, and I *knew* from the set of his face, the next excuse was coming.

"Oh, hell no," I snapped before he could get a word out. "We're not leaving here until you give me a diagnosis. Do you understand me? You will not wash your hands of her, or me. You will not treat her as a mystery you simply couldn't solve. I didn't go to medical school, but I can tell you that she's sick. Her blood work says it. Her hip says it. You *did* go to medical school, so figure. It. Out."

Silence roared louder than any excuse they could have given me.

"Ms. MacKenzie." Dr. Hughes appeared, taking a seat next to Dr. Anderson. "I'm so sorry I haven't been here, but I split my time between this hospital and Denver Children's and just returned this morning. I've seen your daughter's test results, and I think I might have one more thing we can test for. It's incredibly rare, especially in a child this old. And if it is what I think it might be, then we need to act quickly." A clipboard appeared in front of me with yet another consent. "One signature is all I need."

"Do it." My name scrawled across the paper as my hand moved, but it wasn't a conscious effort. Nothing felt like a choice at the moment.

Copyrighted Material

Two hours later Dr. Hughes appeared in the doorway, and I stepped out, leaving Colt and Maisie

wrapped around each other in front of Harry Potter.

"What did you find?"

"It's neuroblastoma."

Ada followed in my car, Colt strapped into his car seat behind her as we made our way through the curves and bends of I-70 toward Denver. I'd never been in the back of an ambulance, not even when I went into labor with the twins. Now my first trip in one lasted five hours.

They took us immediately to the pediatric cancer floor at the Children's Hospital. There was no amount of festive cartoon murals on the walls that could have possibly lightened my mood.

Colt walked beside me, his hand in mine, as they wheeled Maisie down the wide hallway. Little heads peeked out of the doors or raced by, some bald, others not. There were kids dressed as superheroes and princesses, and one very charming Charlie Chaplin. A mother with a cup of coffee gave me a tentative, understanding smile as we passed where she sat.

It was Halloween. How had I forgotten? The kids loved Halloween, and they hadn't said a single word. No costumes, no trick-or-treating, just tests and hospitals, and a mom who couldn't remember what day it was.

I didn't want to be here. I didn't want this to be happening.

But it was.

The nurse who checked Maisie into her room made sure we had everything we needed, including a pullout bed that she said both Colt and I were welcome to sleep on.

"Do you have costumes?" she asked, too chipper to like and too kind to dislike.

Copyrighted Material

"I…I forgot it was Halloween." Was that my voice? So small and wounded? "I'm so sorry, guys," I said to the

twins as they looked up at me with a mix of excitement and disappointment. "I forgot your costumes at home."

Just another way I'd let them down.

"I've got them, no worries," Ada said, plopping a duffel bag onto the couch. "Wasn't sure how long we'd be away, so I grabbed what I could think of. Colt, you're our resident soldier, right?" She handed Colt the plastic-wrapped costume I'd purchased a few weeks ago.

"Yes! Just like Uncle Ryan."

"And Maisie, our little angel. Want to put these on now, or wait?" Ada asked.

"They're welcome to get dressed. We actually do a little trick-or-treat around five, so they'll be all set," the nurse said. I couldn't remember her name. I barely remembered my name.

I nodded my thanks as the kids opened their costumes. Such an ordinary thing in extraordinary circumstances.

Ada wrapped her arm around my shoulders, pulling me in tight.

"It feels more trick than treat," I said quietly so the kids didn't hear me. They giggled and changed, trading pieces so Maisie wore Ryan's Kevlar helmet and Colt had a sparkly, silver halo.

"These are rough days we have coming," Ada agreed. "But you've raised a pair of fighters right there. Maisie won't give up, and Colt sure won't let her."

"Thank you for the costumes. I can't believe I forgot. And everything with Solitude, and gearing up for the season—"

"Stop right there, missy. I've been raising you since you came to Solitude. It's always been you and Ryan, and Ruth, Larry, and me. Ruth was strong, but she knew it would take all of us to pull you kids through after you lost both your parents. Don't you worry about a thing back home. Larry has it under control. And as for the costumes, you have bigger things in that beautiful head

Copyrighted Material

of yours. Just let me feel useful and remember the little ones."

So many scans. CT. PET. The letters ran amok in my head while she was in surgery. They called it minor. The tumor they found on her left adrenal gland and kidney was anything but.

Another conference room, but I wasn't sitting down. I was taking whatever news they had for me standing up. Period.

"Ms. MacKenzie," Dr. Hughes addressed me as she walked in with a team of doctors. I was grateful for whatever arrangement she had with Montrose that allowed her to be here, to have the same face, the same voice with me.

"Well?"

"We performed the biopsy and tested both the tumor and the bone marrow."

"Okay." My arms were crossed tightly, doing their best to hold the rest of me together.

"I'm so sorry, but your daughter's case is very aggressive and advanced. In most neuroblastoma cases, the symptoms present much sooner than this. But Maisie's condition has been progressing without any outward signs. It's likely been advancing undetected for years."

Years. A monster had been growing inside my child for years.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

Dr. Hughes walked around the table to take my hand where I stood rocking back and forth like the twins were still babies in my arms in need of soothing.

"Maisie has stage four neuroblastoma. It's taken over 90 percent of her bone marrow."

Copyrighted Material

I kept my eyes locked on her dark brown ones,

knowing the moment I lost that contact, I'd be drowning again. Already the walls felt like they were closing in, the other doctors fading from my peripheral vision.

"90 percent?" My voice was barely a whisper.

"I'm afraid so."

I swallowed and focused on bringing air in and out of my lungs, trying to find the courage to ask the obvious question. The one I couldn't force past my lips, because the minute it came out and she answered, everything would change.

"Ella?" Doctor Hughes prompted.

"What's her outlook? Her prognosis? What do we do?"

"We attack it immediately and without mercy. We start with chemo, and we move forward. We fight. She fights. And when she's too tired to fight, then you do what you can to fight for her, because this is an all-out war."

"What are her chances?"

"Ella, I'm not sure you want—"

"What are her chances?" I shouted with the last of my energy.

Dr. Hughes paused, then squeezed my hand.

"She has a 10 percent chance of surviving."

That roaring returned to my ears, but I shoved it away, concentrating on every word Dr. Hughes said. I needed every ounce of information.

"She has a 10 percent chance of surviving this?" I echoed, needing her to tell me that I'd heard wrong.

"No. She has a 10 percent chance of surviving the year."

My knees gave out as my back hit the wall. I slid, paper crumpling behind me as my weight took down whatever had been there. I landed on the floor, unable to do anything but breathe. Voices spoke, and I heard but didn't understand what they said.

Copyrighted Material