

REBECCA YARROS

A NOVEL

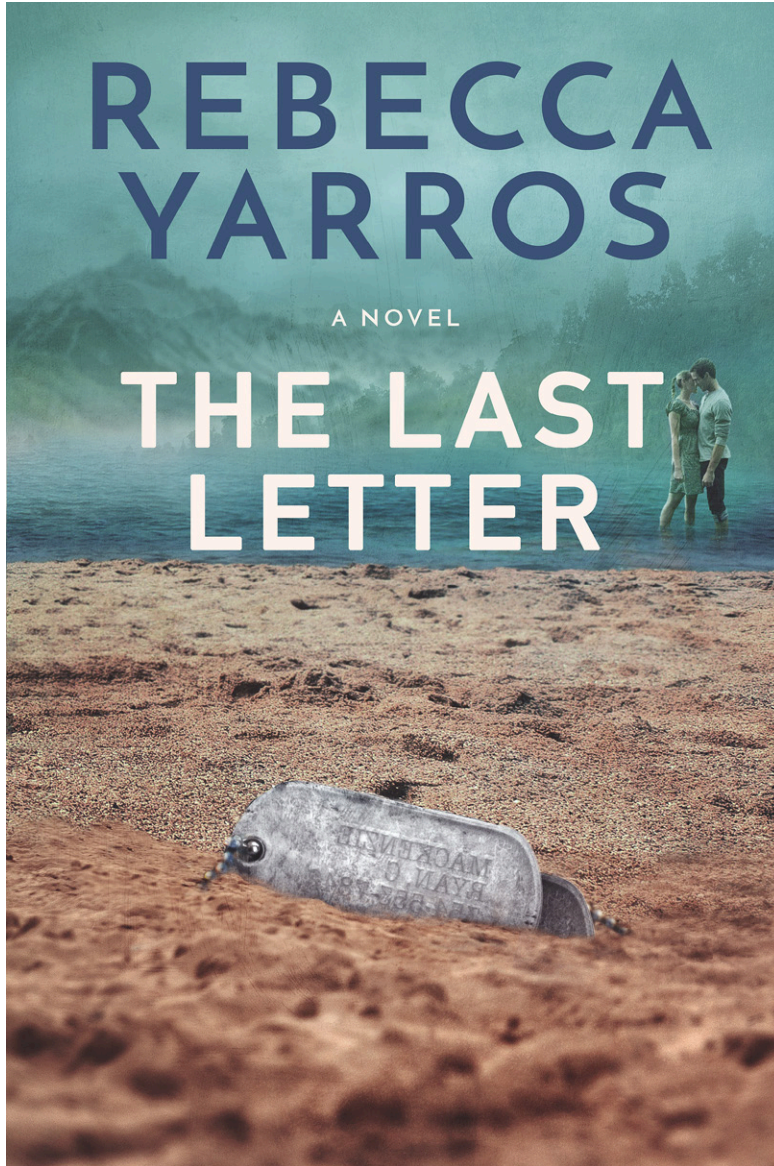
THE LAST LETTER



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YARROS

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THE LAST
LETTER



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AMARA
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*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.*

Dear Reader,

Thank you for supporting a small publisher! Entangled prides itself on bringing you the highest quality romance you've come to expect, and we couldn't do it without your continued support. We love romance, and we hope this book leaves you with a smile on your face and joy in your heart.

xoxo

Liz Pelletier, Publisher

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.

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 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.

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.”

“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.”

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.”

“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.

...

“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.

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.

“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.

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."

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

...

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 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.