

## 3RD PROOF

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

Having fostered then adopted their youngest daughter, Rebecca is passionate about helping children in the foster system through her nonprofit, One October, which she co-founded with her husband in 2019. To learn more about their mission to better the lives of kids in foster care, visit [www.oneoctober.org](http://www.oneoctober.org).

Also by Rebecca Yarros

**Empyrean**

*Fourth Wing*

*Iron Flame*

**Flight & Glory**

*Full Measures*

*Eyes Turned Skyward*

*Beyond What Is Given*

*Hallowed Ground*

*The Reality of Everything*

**Renegades**

*Wilder*

*Nova*

*Rebel*

**Legacy**

*Point of Origin* (Novella)

*Ignite* (Novella)

*Reason to Believe*

*Muses and Melodies*

*A Little Too Close*

# HALLOWED GROUND

REBECCA  
NO.1 SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
YARROS



PIATKUS

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*To CW2 Phillip A. Johnson, CW2 Ian D. Manual,  
their families, and the rest of the Witchdoctor 11 Medevac  
crew, who chanced a hot LZ to medevac my husband,  
only to give their lives a few months later in Fallujah, Iraq.  
There is not a day that I am not eternally grateful  
and humbled by your sacrifice*

*Hallowed Ground* is a thrilling follow-up to Josh and Ember's love story with a happy ending. However, the book includes elements that may not be suitable for all readers. Military service and deployment, plane crashes, depictions of war, medical treatment and procedures, depictions of grief and loss, physical injury treatment, and posttraumatic stress disorder are shown on the page. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note.

# PROLOGUE

## EMBER

**M**y hand hovered over the signature line. Ephesus was almost six thousand miles away. A foreign country. A language I didn't speak. But at least I'd be within three thousand miles of Josh. The same continent for two whole months.

My fingers tightened on the pen, and my name unfolded onto the line with sure, fluid strokes. There. Done. I would be the youngest member of the Ephesus Excavation Fall Team. I sealed and stamped the envelope before I could change my mind.

Five knocks sounded in Paisley's signature rhythm on the front door. She was right on time, as usual. Then again, living next door made for quick travel. I tightened my ponytail and stuffed the spare house key into the tiny pocket of my workout capris before I answered.

"Morning, sunshine!" she drawled with a grin. "You ready to hit the trail?"

"I signed." My tone suggested I'd just committed murder.

"It's about time! Really, it's the right choice, and I'm so excited for you! Let's celebrate with some chai afterward?"

"If by chai, you also mean going to a coffee shop, then I'm game," I answered, dropping the letter in the mailbox and then turning to lock the door behind me. Besides, a four-mile hike

deserved a caffeinated treat. Damn, the freaking key stuck in the lock. Again.

“Oh my God, Ember.” Paisley’s broken whisper sent chills racing from my scalp to my stomach.

I abandoned the key and turned slowly, my tennis shoes catching lightly on the concrete of our shared porch.

That feeling—the one I’d left behind in Colorado—swept over me, sickening my stomach in less time than it took to close my eyes...and I knew.

I...just...knew.

I faced our sidewalk, and the air rushed from my lungs in a soundless sob. This was how my world would end, on a cloudless Saturday morning. *God, no. Josh. Please.* His name was the sweetest prayer in my mind, the desperate call of my soul to his...wherever he might be.

Paisley shook as she took my hand, intertwining our fingers and grounding me. *Which one? God, which one?* There was no right answer.

My world paused, as though my mind knew to take in every excruciating detail of this moment—the sunshine filtering through the hanging baskets of flowers we’d just planted, the sounds of laughing children one house over, and the somber expressions of the two officers who walked steadily toward us...

In dress blues.



# CHAPTER ONE

EMBER

*Four Months Earlier*

“I’m just saying that not all of us are six-foot-four, Joshua Walker.” I tilted my head to the side as he put another cooking gadget Mom swore we needed onto the top shelf of the kitchen cabinets.

Josh turned that damn smile on me and shut the door with a flick of his hand before caging me between his hips and the counter. “Okay. When you need something from the top shelf, I’ll race over and get it down for you.”

“Not the point.” I fought back the smile that had been a nearly permanent fixture during the last two days that we’d lived together.

*You live together. No more long distance. No more missing him.*

I looped my arms around his neck, letting my fingertips graze over the newly cut hair at the base of his head. “What about those times you’re not here?”

His gaze dropped to my lips. “Well, then maybe you could simply choose not to fondue for lunch?”

My stomach warmed at the look in his eyes—the one that seemed to ignore that we’d just gotten out of bed an hour ago. His arms tightened around me, bringing our lower bodies flush,

and my pulse leaped.

“But maybe I like melted chocolate,” I whispered. “It has all kinds of uses.”

Those smoldering brown eyes locked on to mine, and I saw it there—the longing that had been our companion these last two years, waiting to finally be together, the intense chemistry that never failed to turn my body pliant the moment he so much as whispered my name.

“December.”

That did it. I was a puddle before his lips even touched mine. His mouth brushed them once, twice, before settling over me in a languorous kiss that had me arching against him. I opened for him, and Josh took advantage, stroking his tongue against mine with enough friction to set me on fire.

My heart soared, pouring so much emotion into me that I wasn't sure my body could handle it. A laugh burst free, and I felt him smile against my mouth in response.

“Kissing me is funny?” he asked, lifting me to the counter to bury his nose just beneath my jaw.

“No!” I giggled again as he growled.

His face lifted, the light in his eyes reflecting the sheer joy I couldn't contain. “What then?”

My fingers traced the lines of his face, catching on his rough morning stubble. God, he was just so freaking gorgeous. Somehow he'd gotten hotter in the last two years, time stripping away the last vestiges of boyhood from this glorious piece of man. “I'm just happy.”

“Well, that's the idea.”

“I keep thinking about the hours we spent driving between Nashville and Fort Rucker, and the stolen weekends, and the good-byes...” And the times we both wondered how long our relationship could stay this strong without living in the same zip code.

He kissed me softly. “No more good-byes.”

“Promise?” A tremor slipped into my voice.

He cupped my face and looked so deeply into my eyes that I knew he was reaching for my soul. “I will never leave you again by choice, December. This is it. We made it through the worst, and now we’re here.”

I sighed and nodded. “So now what? Everything we’ve done has been to get to this point.”

A breathtaking smile swept over his face. “Now, we’re just happy. You and me, and this townhouse full of boxes.”

*Bam! Bam!* Our shared duplex wall carried the noise from our neighbors. “It’s a little early for a hammer, Jagger,” I muttered.

“But maybe not too early to get nailed?” Josh wiggled his eyebrows and swallowed my laugh with a kiss.

If happiness had its own electrical current, we could have powered the whole city of Clarksville.

The alarm blared on my cell phone, and I reached for it, randomly slapping the counter in search while trying not to break from Josh’s mouth. *Oh, screw the phone.*

I wound my arms around his neck and threw myself into the kiss, angling the way I knew he liked and sucking his tongue into my mouth. He groaned, sinking his fingers into my hair, and then drove me wild with every lick, nibble, and caress. Josh pulled back with a gentle bite on my lower lip and then silenced my phone.

“Fun time’s over, Ms. Howard. You have class in an hour and ten minutes.” He waved the phone.

“And?” I questioned, sliding my hands under his PT shirt to feel the delectable ridges of his abs.

With a muttered curse, he retreated. “And it takes one hour and seven minutes to get there, which means it’s time for you to go.”

I threw on my best pout. “I can skip.”

He took my messenger bag and travel coffee mug and thrust

them both into my lap. “No. We had a deal. Normal life, which includes you going to class, no matter how badly I’d like to take you back upstairs and listen to you scream my name as you come.”

Need slammed into me, and my breath left in a rush. “That’s really not the best argument to get me to leave.”

He put the kitchen island between us. “We don’t have to fight for time together anymore. This is our normal, babe. So you go to class, and I’ll go to work. And if you’re a good girl...”

I hopped off the counter and slung my bag over my shoulder, stalking him until his back hit the counter. “If I’m a good girl?” My fingers dipped into his waistband.

His eyes darkened, and his gaze dropped to my lips. “You’ll find out when you get home.”

*Home.* I lived with Josh. A fresh wave of euphoria bloomed in my chest. “You have a deal. Whatever will you do while I’m gone?”

“Oh, the normal. Go to work, maybe hang those pictures you marked for the upstairs hallway. Seriously, who frames the Gettysburg address?”

“An avid historian who happens to love that speech.” I pushed up on tiptoe and kissed him. “I’ll see you later, love.”

He tucked my hair behind my ear. “Send me a text and let me know you made it.”

“You bet.”

I grabbed my coat out of the front closet and zipped it up, barely remembering my coffee as I ran out the door with my books.

“December!” Josh called from the doorway as I slid the key into my car.

“Josh?”

His smile stole the very sun from the sky. “These have been the best three days of my life. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Just wait until you’re sick of me.” I winked,

and he laughed.

“Not going to happen. Have a nice day, dear!” he sang, waving and stepping through our front door.

I pulled out of our shared driveway, slightly jealous that Paisley’s car was still parked. She’d completed everything she needed face-to-face last semester and was finishing her degree with online courses. We’d all decided on a little neighborhood on the outskirts of Clarksville, Tennessee, and lucked out that the new development had both sides of a duplex open.

Jagger declared the gods of realty had smiled upon their bromance, and we’d signed the leases. I loved being so close to our friends.

Driving an hour to Nashville twice a week to finish at Vanderbilt was more than worth it to sleep next to Josh every night. Besides, it gave me a chance to call Mom, or catch up with April or Sam. As mild as this January was going weather-wise, it was an easy trip.

I made it to a parking space with seven minutes to spare and ended up sprinting to class, taking the first seat along the U-shaped conference table. My laptop fired up as our professor walked in.

“Good morning, seniors,” Dr. Trimble said, placing his coffee on the small podium. He glanced at each of us in turn. “Welcome to Thesis. It’s good to see so many familiar faces. For those of you who don’t know me, I’m not sure how you made it through Vanderbilt without being subjected to my rambling, but bravo.”

A small murmur of laughter passed through the twenty or so of us.

He ran a hand over his balding head and adjusted his houndstooth bowtie. “Before we get started, I’d like to introduce my TA.” He motioned with his hand, and I turned with the class toward the back of the room. “Mr. Graham is working on his masters, and is doubling as my research assistant.”

The corners of my mouth lifted when Luke stood and waved, offering me a smile and a nod. He mouthed, “Coffee?” and I gave a small nod before turning my attention back to Dr. Trimble.

“He’ll also be handling the applications for the dig I’m overseeing this fall in Ephesus, Turkey. For those of you continuing on to your masters and doctorates, it would behoove you to apply, as only those who are accepted on the dig will be considered to start in a special spring opening in those programs. Now, let’s get down to business.”

An hour and a thick syllabus later, Luke and I headed toward the coffee shop.

“How’s it going, Red?” he asked, nudging me with his shoulder.

“Good,” I answered as we walked. “Josh and I moved in together, and it’s pretty perfect so far.”

“Ah, the hockey star returns.” He held the door open for me, and the welcoming smell of espresso filled my lungs.

“The hockey star never left,” I elbowed him. “How is David?”

Luke snorted. “Still leaving his boxers on the floor, but I love him, so what can I do?”

“It’s a pretty small problem in the scheme of things, right?”

“There are worse problems to have,” he answered. “Hopefully the line isn’t too long. Our spot is open.”

Once our coffee was in hand, we took up seats on the small loveseat in the corner that we’d claimed during study sessions my junior year. “What are your plans after graduation?” Luke asked, brushing an errant piece of blond hair out of his eyes. He was still trying for the surfer look, but it was growing on me.

“Well, Josh is stationed at Fort Campbell now, so I’m throwing around the idea of getting my masters...maybe my doctorate?”

“Ooh.” He leaned forward with an indecent grin. “Talk academia to me.”

I laughed and shook my head. “I...I have...”

“Spit it out.”

“I kind of want to start focusing more on the writing aspect, really dig in historically, maybe publish something? It’s probably not going to happen. I should teach. That’s the practical answer.”

Luke raised his eyebrows. “You kept a long-distance relationship thriving, and you want to talk about practical? You’re a romantic at heart, honey—you can’t fool me. You also do whatever you set your mind to, so if you’d like to be the next David McCullough, I think the world is ready.”

“What about the next Howard Zinn?” I suggested. “Revolutionize what everyone thinks they know. Look at history from another side and not just the victor’s?”

He tapped his fingers on his paper cup and tilted his head. “You need to apply for the Ephesus dig.”

I sputtered, nearly spewing coffee all over his cream sweater. “What? That’s in Turkey.”

“Well, I don’t think we can move the location, so yes, you’d have to come to Turkey.”

“You’re going?” That was definitely an incentive.

“Seeing as my dad funded it, I kind of have to.”

“Did he get tired of buying hockey teams?” I joked.

“Hey, it’s just the one, and technically since it’s an expansion team, he didn’t buy it, he started it. Stop changing the subject and think of all the opportunities. Putting your hands on arguably the most untouched Roman ruins in the world... You’re still emphasizing in European History, right?”

I nodded slowly, trying to process his suggestion. “I just moved in with Josh. I can’t up and leave.”

“Red, it’s like two months, which is a blip on the radar to you guys, and you’d earn mad street cred with Dr. Trimble toward getting into whatever program you want.”

“Okay, you don’t get to say ‘street cred’ again without me laughing.”

“Fine, but you need to apply. You’ll get accepted. Your grades still stellar?”

“Yeah.”

*Could you really spend two months away from him when you’ve been apart for so long?*

“Then I think this is something you really need to consider.” He rummaged through his messenger bag and brought out a stapled packet. “This is the application. It’s not due until spring break. You’d really be an asset, Ember. Plus, if you’re just now thinking about your doctorate, you’re behind the power curve. The dig would let you into the spring program. Without it, you’re behind a year. Plus, it’s not like you didn’t love the one we did last year, and that was a baby dig compared to this.”

Ephesus. A real dig. A chance to discover something—a new theory, a new fact, something I could sink my teeth into and maybe even publish. A real-life use for all the work I’d put into my college career. But not seeing Josh? Voluntarily being long distance again? Madness. I pushed the application away. “I just can’t.”

He shook his head and stuffed it into my bag. “Yes, you can. You’re a brilliant woman, Ember, and if he loves you the way you say he does, he’d never dim your light. Don’t become one of those women who forget who they are just because they’re in a relationship. At least think about it.”

“I will,” I promised.

He filled me in on his relationship, and I gave him the short version of how the move had gone, until it was time to head to another class. I’d loaded my schedule last semester, so all I needed were three this go-round, thank God.

I called Josh from the car on my way home. *Home!* I’d never been so excited to see what a normal evening could hold. “Hey!”

“Hey, babe.” His tired voice came through the car speakers.

“How was your first day at the unit?”

“Mixed, I guess. You headed home?”



“It’s never easy being the new guy, and yeah I’m on my way. GPS has me fifty-five minutes out. Are you in the same company as Will?”

“Yeah, Carter and I are both in Charlie. Jagger’s in Bravo with the other attack guys. You concentrate on the road, and I’ll work on getting us some dinner, how does that sound?”

Something shifted in my stomach, an unease that crept up my throat. “Everything okay?”

“It will be once you get here.” He tried to sound upbeat but didn’t quite make it.

“Okay. I love you.”

“I love you so much it hurts. See you in an hour.”

We hung up, and I cranked some music, but I couldn’t shake the crappy feeling that settled in my chest, or help but think about that Ephesus application in my bag.

I walked through our front door five minutes earlier than the GPS predicted. Our living room was partially put away, some of my books haphazardly stacked on the white bookshelves, and a few framed pictures were laid on the square coffee table.

My fingers grazed over Dad’s face and that familiar ache returned. Two years, and I still missed him every day.

“I thought you might want to decide where to hang them,” Josh said, coming from the small dining room where our four-person table from my old apartment was a cozy fit. He kissed the side of my head and pulled me into a hug, chasing away the sadness with his love.

“That sounds great,” I answered, wrapping my arms around his back. He’d already changed into a pair of jeans and a Henley. I had to admit, I liked my Josh better than Lieutenant Walker. “What is that heavenly smell?”

“Takeout from the Italian place down the street. I grabbed your favorites,” he said, leading me to the table after I took off my jacket and dropped my bag.

We sat and my mouth watered at the tortellini Alfredo in

front of me. “This looks so good.” I shot him a sly grin. “Is this what I have to look forward to at the end of my school days?”

He laughed. “Day three and you’re ready to divvy up the household chores.”

My cheeks flamed because...

“Don’t worry, I know you already have a color-coded chart somewhere dictating what needs doing and when. Just stick it on the fridge, and we’ll get it done.” His smile melted me more than the wine he’d poured.

He knew me way too well. “The chart isn’t color-coded, but that’s not a half-bad idea.”

“There’s a fresh pack of highlighters waiting for you in the desk drawer. Now tell me everything about the first day of your last semester of college.”

I filled him in on everything about the classes but paused when I thought about the application. “There’s...there’s a dig.”

“Another one? That’s awesome. Where are you going?” he asked as if it was nothing, simply taking another bite of his food.

And I loved him all the more for it.

Josh would never hold me back, never discount my dreams to pay for his own. That’s why I couldn’t abuse that love. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not going. I don’t even know if I’d get in.”

“You’ll get in. Why don’t you want to go?”

“It’s not a two-week trip this time, it’s two months, in Ephesus, Turkey, and I don’t want to be away from you that long.”

“Turkey?” His fork paused on the way to his mouth.

“Yeah, and not the bird.” I shook my finger at whatever smart reply he was thinking. Jagger had rubbed off on his sense of humor.

He quirked an eyebrow. “You should go. That’s huge.”

“We just clawed our way through a very complicated two years, Josh. This is our time, our chance. You’re too important to me to press pause so I can play with some dirt.” *Some really*

*cool, very rare, historically badass dirt.*

“You really should go.” His voice dropped an octave, and his gaze fell to the tablecloth.

“Oh no, you’re not going to be all selfless and Joshy about this. I want this time with you—barbecues with our friends and sneaking off to watch you fly. I can do research from here. I don’t need to go to Turkey. I need to be with you.”

His fork hit the plate, the clanging obscenely loud in our bare house. “We won’t have the summer together, December. You should go, because I won’t be here.”

I carefully set my fork down, a sickening foreboding settling over us. My food turned over in my stomach as my heart jumped.

“Why? Why won’t you be here?”

“God, baby. I’m so sorry.”

And just like that...I knew.

“Say it.” *Don’t say it. Deny it.* I glanced over to where the double-star service flag hung in our window. Paisley and I had thought they were so cute when we’d bought our matching set. But while Paisley’s were both blue, one of our stars was gold for Dad. I ripped my eyes away, refusing to think of stitching any other color onto it, and locked eyes with the man who owned my very soul. “Tell me, Josh.”

“We’re on deployment orders.”

My eyes slid shut, like I could block this out, hide from it. It could be Honduras, Guatemala, hell, even Korea. It didn’t have to be over there, to that country that had nearly killed him and had ultimately taken my father from me.

“Where?” Our eyes locked, every ounce of the love we’d worked so hard for pouring between us, trying to fill the cracks that would soon become a canyon of distance.

“Afghanistan.”

So much for being *just happy*.