

2ND PROOF

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She loves military heroes and has been blissfully married to hers for twenty-one years. She's the mother of six children and lives in Colorado with her family, their stubborn English bulldog, feisty chinchillas, and Maine Coon cat 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.

Visit her website at www.RebeccaYarros.com for more!

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FULL MEASURES

REBECCA
NO.1 SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
YARROS



PIATKUS

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*For Jason, you always have been and will eternally be
worth my full measure.*

Full Measures is a story about recovering from loss and claiming love again. However, it contains some difficult themes and elements that might not be suitable for some readers. These include: Death of a parent, depictions of grief, family conflict, alcohol use, infidelity, military service and deployment, injury, graphic sex on page, and the threat of sexual exploitation. Readers who may be sensitive to these, please take note.

CHAPTER ONE

Who the hell would be pounding on the door at 7:05 a.m.? Three tiny knocks on my bedroom door echoed the harsher ones downstairs. Mom was going to chew their butts for interrupting her morning routine.

“Come in!” I called out, scanning through my iPod’s playlist before pressing sync. Music made running more tolerable. Barely. Running was hellish, but I’d already calculated how far I had to go to compensate for the Christmas fudge I’d be scarfing down during the rest of my visit home. The thermometer outside said thirteen degrees, and human ice sculptures were overrated, so Colorado at Christmas meant it would be treadmill city. *Yay, me.*

Gus’s strawberry-blond curls popped through the small opening of the door, my lab goggles from Chem 101 perched on his forehead. They gave his seven-year-old, puckered-up-in-frustration face a more mad scientist vibe. “What’s up, buddy?” I asked.

“Ember? Can you answer the door?” he begged.

I turned down the music coming from my laptop. “The door?”

He nodded, nearly losing the goggles. My lips twitched,

fighting the smile that spread across my face while I tried not to laugh. “I’m supposed to go to hockey, and Mom won’t answer the door for carpool,” he said.

I put on my best serious face as I glanced back at the clock. “Okay, Gus, but it’s only seven, and I don’t think you have hockey until the afternoon. Mom never forgets a practice.” I’d inherited my type-A nature from somewhere.

He let out an exasperated sigh. “But what if it’s *early*?”

“Six hours early?”

“Well, yeah!” He gave me a wide-eyed stare declaring me the most oblivious sister *ever*.

“Okay, buddy.” I caved like always. The way he’d cried when I left for college last year pretty much gave the kid free reign over my soul. Gus was the only person I didn’t mind going off schedule for.

I checked Skype one more time before closing my laptop, hoping I’d see Dad pop online. He’d been gone three months, two weeks, and six days. Not that I was counting. “He’ll call today,” Gus promised, hugging my side. “He has to. It’s a rule or something. They always get to call for their kid’s birthday.”

I forced out a smile and hugged his scrawny body. It didn’t matter that I turned twenty today, I just wanted to hear from Dad. The knocks sounded again. “Mom!” I called out. “Door!” I grabbed a hair tie off my desk and held it in my teeth while I gathered my long hair back in a pre-run ponytail.

“I told you,” he mumbled into my side. “She won’t answer. It’s like she wants me to miss hockey, and you know that means I’ll suck forever! I don’t want Coach Walker to think I suck!”

“Don’t say suck.” I kissed the top of his head. He smelled like his orange, Spiderman-labeled shampoo and sunshine. “Let’s go see.”

He thrust his arms out in victory and raced down the hallway ahead of me, taking the back stairs closest to my room. He slid through the kitchen in his socks, and I snagged a bottle of water from the fridge on my way. The knocks sounded again, and Mom still didn't answer. She must have run off for errands with April or something, though seven in the morning was way too early for my younger sister.

I passed through the dining room, twisted open the top on the bottle, and walked into the living room, opposite the foyer. Two shadows stood outside the door, poised to knock again.

"Just a minute!" I called out, hopping over the Lego star destroyer Gus had abandoned in the middle of the floor. Stepping on a Lego was a special degree of hell that only someone with a little brother could really understand.

"Don't answer it." Mom's strangled whisper came from the front staircase, which stopped only a few feet from the front door.

"Mom?" I came around the steps and found her huddled in on herself, rocking back and forth. Her hands covered her hair, strands of dark auburn the exact same shade as mine weaving through her fingers where she tugged. Something was wrong. "Mom, who's here?"

"No, no, no, no, no," she mumbled, refusing to lift her head from her knees.

I drew back and took a look at Gus with raised eyebrows. He shrugged in response with a see-I-told-you-so look. "Where's April?" I asked him.

"Sleeping." Of course. At seventeen, all April did was sleep, sneak out, and sleep again.

"Right." Another three knocks sounded. They were brisk, efficient, and accompanied by a soft male voice.

"Mrs. Howard?" His voice was distorted through the door,

but through the center glass panel, I saw that he'd leaned in. "Please, ma'am."

Mom raised her head and met my eyes. They were dead, as though someone had sucked the life from them, and her mouth hung slack. This was not my Stepford-perfect mother.

"What's going on?" April asked with a massive yawn, dropping to sit on the top step in her pajamas, her bright red hair a messy tangle from sleep.

I shook my head and turned to the door. The knob was warm in my hand. They taught us in elementary school never to open a warm door during a fire. *Why did I think of that?* I glanced back at Mom and made my choice. Ignoring her plea, I opened the door in slow motion.

Two army officers in Dress Blue uniform consumed our stoop, their hats in their hands. My stomach lurched. *No. No. No.*

She knew. That's why Mom hadn't opened the door. She knew.

Tears stung my eyes, burning my nose before the men could even get a word out. My water bottle slipped from my hand, bursting open on the doorframe and pouring water over their shined shoes. The younger of the two soldiers started to speak, and I put my finger up, silencing him before I softly shut the door.

My breath expelled in a quiet sob, and I rested my head against the warm door. I had opened the door to a fire, and it was poised to decimate my family. I sucked in a shaky breath and put a bright smile on my face as I turned to Gus. "Hey, buddy." I stroked my hands over his beautiful, innocent little head. I couldn't stop what was coming, but I could spare him this. "My iPhone is on my nightstand." *In the room furthest from the front door.* "Why don't you head up to my room and play Angry Birds for a bit? It's not hockey, just grown-up stuff, okay? Play until I

come get you.”

His eyes lit up, and I forced my smile harder. How long would it be until I saw that in his eyes again? “Cool!” he shouted and raced up the front steps, passing April on his way. “See, Ember lets me play with *her* phone!” he teased as his footsteps raced toward my room.

“What is going on?” April demanded. I ignored her and turned to Mom.

I dropped to my knees on the step beneath hers and brushed back her hair. “It’s time to let them in, Mom. We’re all here.” I gave a distorted smile through the blur my vision had become.

She didn’t respond. It took a minute before I realized she wasn’t going to. She just wasn’t...here. April scooted down the steps, sitting next to Mom. I opened the door again and nearly lost it at the pity in the younger soldier’s eyes. The older one began to speak. “June Howard?”

I shook my head. “Ember—December Howard. My mother,” I choked out and gestured behind me, “is June.” I stood next to her and reached through the banister railing to rest my hand on her back.

He could be wounded. Just wounded. They came to the door for serious wounds. Yeah, just wounded. We could handle that.

The soldiers nodded. “I am Captain Vincent and this is Lieutenant Morgan. May we come in?”

I nodded. He wore the same patch on his shoulder as my father. They stepped in, their wet shoes squeaking on the tiles of the entry hall, and shut the door behind them. “June Howard, wife of Lieutenant Colonel Justin Howard?” he asked. She nodded weakly, but kept her eyes trained on the rug while Captain Vincent ended my world.

“The Secretary of the Army has asked me to express his

deep regret that your husband, Justin, was killed in action in Kandahar, Afghanistan, earlier this morning, the nineteenth of December. He was killed by small arms fire in a Green on Blue incident in the hospital, which is still under investigation. The Secretary extends his deepest sympathy to you and your family in your tragic loss.”

My hands slid to the railing to keep me upright, and my eyes closed as tears raced down my face. I knew the regs. Twenty years as an army brat had taught me they had to notify us within a certain number of hours of identifying him. Hours. He’d been alive *hours* ago. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t drag the air into my lungs in a world that didn’t have my father in it anymore. It wasn’t possible. Everything dropped from under me, and unmatched pain tore through every cell in my body, erupting in a sob I couldn’t keep contained. April’s scream split the air, ripping through me. God, it hurt. It hurt.

“Ma’am?” the young lieutenant asked. “Is there someone we can call for you? Casualty Assistance should be here soon, but until then?”

Casualty. My father had been killed. Dead. Green on Blue. He’d been shot by someone in an Afghani uniform. My father was a doctor. A doctor! *Who the hell shoots a doctor?* They had to be wrong. Did Dad even carry a weapon?

“Ma’am?”

Why wasn’t Mom answering?

She remained silent, her eyes trained on the pattern of the carpet runner on the stairs, refusing to answer.

Unable to answer.

Something shifted in me; the weight of responsibility settled on my shoulders, dislodging some of the pain so I could breathe. I had to be the adult right now because no one else here could. “I’ll

take care of her until Casualty Assistance arrives,” I managed to say with a shaky voice, speaking over April’s shrieks.

“You’re sure?” Captain Vincent asked, concern etching his unfamiliar features.

I nodded. “They keep a binder, just in case this—” I shoved my knuckles into my mouth, biting down as hard as I could to stop the wail desperate to emerge. I steadied myself again, sucking in air. Why was it so damn hard to breathe? “In case this happens—happened.” Dad was a believer that nothing bad happened to prepared people. He’d hate to know he’d been wrong.

The captain nodded. He pulled out a form and had me verify that the information in Dad’s handwriting was correct. This was our address, our phone number. Those were our names and dates of birth. The lieutenant startled. “Happy birthday, December,” he whispered.

Captain Vincent sent him a silent glare. “We are so very sorry for your loss. Casualty Assistance will be here within the hour, and the care team is ready if that’s okay with you.” I agreed. I knew the drill, and what Mom needed.

The door shut behind them, leaving our world shattered.

For the next hour, Mom sat silently on the stairs while April wailed on my shoulder. This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. I couldn’t hold her tight enough to make it stop. The care team arrived around the same time April’s cries softened to sniffles. I waved them inside. Armed with sympathetic eyes and casserole schedules, the three women from the family readiness group of Dad’s unit took over the tasks that hadn’t been done yet. The breakfast dishes were cleared, laundry put in place, the cereal Gus had spilled earlier on the kitchen floor swept. I knew they were here to help—they would smooth things over until Grams could get here—but I couldn’t help but feel invaded, taken over

like we were somehow unable to care for ourselves.

Who was I kidding? Mom was still huddled on the stairs. We couldn't care for ourselves. One of the care team members took Gus a snack and assured me he was still engrossed in Angry Birds. I couldn't tell him. I couldn't do it.

The casualty assistance officer knocked quietly an hour later, and I opened the door. April walked Mom to the couch and sat her down, bracing her with pillows to keep her upright. Her eyes changed focus from the carpet runner to the blank screen of the television deep within the recesses of the armoire. She refused to look at any of us. I'm not sure she was capable of understanding what had truly happened. Then again, I'm not sure I was capable of understanding what had really happened, either, but I didn't have the luxury of going catatonic.

"My name is Captain Adam Wilson," he introduced himself. He wore Dress Blues just like the notification officers had, but he seemed uncomfortable in the role he had been assigned to play. I knew I would be. His frame nearly filled the loveseat across from the couch my mother sat upon, and he dragged the coffee table toward him, softly scraping the carpet. "Did you want someone to take notes?" He glanced at Mom. "For when she's feeling up to it?"

"I've got it," a woman from the team said softly, pen and notebook ready.

Captain Wilson gathered a stack of papers from his leather briefcase, and tugged at his tie, making a minor adjustment. "There's another child, correct?" He shuffled through a few of his papers until he selected a form. "August Howard?"

"Gus is upstairs," I answered, taking the seat on the other side of Mom, closest to Captain Wilson. I clutched the black binder I'd gotten out of Mom's office. It was the very last item

in the filing cabinet, just like Dad had told me before he left. “I haven’t told him yet.”

“Would you like me to?” Captain Wilson asked softly. I briefly considered it. Mom was in no state to discuss it with him, and Captain Wilson had probably been trained to deliver information like that. I couldn’t do it though, let a stranger alter the universe of my little brother.

“No. I’ll do it myself.”

April began crying again, but Mom sat as still as ever, vacant, not really here with us. “I want to give him as long as possible before I have to. His world is still normal. He doesn’t know that nothing will ever be the same for him.” I bit back my own sob. “He’s seven years old and everything he knows just ended. So I think I’ll give him just another few minutes.” *Before I tear him to pieces.* My skin flushed as new tears came to the surface. I supposed that was the way things would go for a while. I needed to get better at pushing them back.

Captain Wilson cleared his throat and nodded his head. “I can understand that.” He explained his role to us, that he would be our guide to Dad’s casualty process. He would help us through the paperwork, the ceremony, the things no one saw coming. In a way, he was our handler, sent here to be a buffer between our grief and the United States Army. I was thankful for him just as much as I hated his sheer existence.

He would be with us until we told him we no longer needed him.

After he finished his explanation, the barrage of questions began. April excused herself, saying she had to lie down. There was no doubt in my mind that within a few minutes, this would all go public on Facebook. April was never one to suffer in silence.

The questions started, and I opened the black binder. Dad’s

handwriting was scrawled all over the pages of his will, his life insurance policy, and his last wishes, all the paperwork carefully organized for this exact moment. Did we know where he wanted to be buried? What kind of casket he wanted? Was there anyone we wanted with us? Was the bank account correct for the life insurance money to be deposited? Did we want to fly to Dover to meet his remains while the army prepared him for burial?

Dover. It was like crossing the army's version of the river Styx.

Mom remained silent, staring at that blank television as I found the answers to what he asked. No question pulled her from her stupor, no tug of her hand, no whisper of her name could bring her back to where I was desperate for her to be. It was becoming blatantly obvious that I was alone. "Is there someone we can call to help make these decisions with your mother?" His mouth tightened as he slipped a discreet glance toward my mother. I was unsure how many shocked widows he'd seen in his career, but Mom was my first.

Grams was a day away. Because she was Dad's mom, I knew the army had officially notified her, just as we had been. No doubt she was already on her way, but until she got here, there was no one else. Mom's parents were dead. Her brother had never been around much in our lives, and I couldn't see a good reason to bring him in now. "There's just me," I replied. "I'll take responsibility for the decisions until she can."

"Ember?" Gus's small voice came from the steps where he stood. "What's going on?"

I placed Mom's hand back in her lap. It wasn't like she noticed I was holding it anyway. After the deepest breath ever taken, I walked over to my little brother. I sat down next to him on the steps and repeated everything we knew in seven-year-old terms,

which wasn't anything really. But I had to repeat the one thing we knew for certain. "Daddy isn't coming home, Gus."

Little blue eyes filled with tears, and his lower lip began to quiver. "Did the bad guys get him?"

"Yes, baby." I pulled him into my arms and held him, rocking him back and forth like I had when he was an infant, our parents' miracle baby. I brushed his hair back over his forehead and kissed him.

"But it's your birthday." His warm tears soaked through my running shirt and immediately chilled as I held him as tightly as possible. I would have done anything to take away this pain, to unsay what I knew had to be said. But I couldn't take the bullet from Dad.

Gus cried himself out while Captain Wilson sat, patiently observing my mother and her nonresponse. I wondered how long it would be until words like "medicate" and "psychologist" were brought up. My mother was the strongest person I knew, but she'd always stood on the foundation that was my father.

Once the last of his little sobs shook his body, I asked him what he needed, if there was anything I could do to make this better for him. "I want you to have cake and ice cream." He lifted his head off my chest and squeezed my hand. "I want it to be your birthday."

Panic welled within me, my heart rate accelerating, tears pricking my eyes. Something fierce and terrible clawed at my insides, demanding release, demanding acknowledgment, demanding to be felt. I grimaced more than smiled and nodded my head exuberantly, cupping Gus's sweet face. I turned my attention to Captain Wilson. "Can we take a ten minute break?"

The captain nodded slowly, as though he sensed I was close to losing it, his one stable person in a house of grieving women

and children. “Is there anything you need?”

“Could you please call my Grams and check on her? She lost her husband in Vietnam...” It was all I could force out. I inched closer to the inevitable scream that welled up within my body.

“I can do that.”

I kissed Gus’s forehead, grabbed my keys, and ran out the door before I didn’t have the strength to stand any longer. I flung myself into the driver’s seat of my Volkswagen Jetta, my high school graduation present from my parents. Dad wanted me in something safe so I could make it home on weekends from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Too bad he wasn’t as protected in Afghanistan.

I forced the key into the ignition, cranked the engine, and backed out of the driveway too quickly. I tore down the hill, taking the curves, heedless with my safety for the first time since I got my driver’s license. In front of the grocery store, the stoplight turned red, and I became aware of the chill seeping into me, making my fingers tingle. The car read seventeen degrees outside, and I was still dressed for treadmill running. I hadn’t grabbed my coat. I parked the Jetta and walked into the grocery store, thankful for the numbing sensation in my arms and heart.

I found the bakery section and crossed my arms. Cake. Gus wanted a cake, so I would get him one. Chocolate. Vanilla. Strawberry. Whipped icing. Buttercream icing. There were too many choices. It was just a damned cake! Why did I need that many choices? Who cared? I grabbed the one nearest to me and headed for the ice cream section where I snatched a quart of chocolate chip cookie dough on autopilot.

I was halfway to the checkout counter when I ran into a small family. They were average: mom, dad, one boy, one girl. They laughed as they decided what movie to rent for that night,

and the little girl won, asking for *The Santa Clause*. How was it possible these people were having such a normal day, such a normal conversation? Didn't they understand the world had just ended?

"You know, they'll write on that for you if you want his name on it." The masculine voice broke me from my train of thought, and I looked up into a somewhat familiar set of brown eyes underneath a worn CU hat. I knew him, but couldn't remember how. He was achingly familiar. Of course I would take note of a guy as hot as this one. But in a university with forty thousand other students, there was always someone who looked familiar, and there were very few who I could actually name, or even remember the details of how we'd met. With a face and body like that, I should have remembered this guy, even this shell-shocked.

The guy was waiting for me to say something.

"Oh, yeah, the cake." My thoughts were fuzzy, and I was desperately holding on to what I had left of them. I nodded my head and muttered thanks as I headed back to the bakery. My feet moved of their own accord, thank God.

The heavysset woman behind the counter reached out to take the cake and I handed it over. "Could you write 'happy birthday' on this?"

"Sure can, honey. Whose special day is it?"

Special day? This was a day from hell. I stood there at the counter of the grocery store, with a cake I didn't even care about, and realized this was unequivocally the worst day of my life. Maybe there should have been some comfort in that, knowing if this was the worst day, there was nowhere to go but up. But what if it really wasn't the worst day? What if tomorrow was just waiting around the corner, ready to pounce and bring me to a new low?

“Miss?” My eyes focused back on the baker’s face. “Whose name would you like on the cake?”

“December.”

“Yes, ma’am, it is December, but whose name would you like on the cake?”

The same griefy-panic threatened to well up again in me, choking my throat. “It’s mine. My name is December.”

A string of giggles erupted from the baker. “But, ma’am, these are Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. It’s a boy’s cake!”

Something snapped inside me. The dam broke, the river raged, whatever pun came to mind. “I don’t care what kind of cake it is!”

“But surely you’d be happier—”

I’d had it. “No, I wouldn’t be happier. Do you know what would make me happy? I would like to go back to bed, and for none of this to have happened. I don’t want to be standing in the middle of this grocery store, buying a stupid cake so my little brother can pretend that our dad isn’t dead! So, no, I don’t care what kind of cake it is, Ninja Turtles or Barbie or Sponge Bob freaking Square Pants!”

The woman’s lip began to tremble, and tears formed in her eyes. “Happy...Birthday...December,” she said as she slowly dragged the icing bag across the green and blue cake, inscribing my name. She handed the cake back over with shaking hands and I accepted it with a thankful nod.

I turned to see the CU guy with his hand in mid-reach for a pack of blueberry muffins, but his eyes were locked on me, wide with shock.

I couldn’t blame him; I was shocked at my outburst, too, appalled that I’d lost it in the middle of the grocery store.

Tears streamed down my face unnoticed as I stood at the

register, waiting for the young girl to ring up my cake and ice cream. “Thirty-two nineteen,” she told me. I reached for my back pocket, where I normally kept my tiny wallet, but found only the smooth spandex of my running shorts.

“Shit,” I whispered, closing my eyes in defeat. No coat. No wallet. Great planning.

“I got this.” The brown-eyed guy slid a fifty dollar bill across the conveyor belt to the clerk. I hadn’t even noticed he’d been behind me.

I turned to look back up at him, stunned at how tall he was. I only reached his collarbone. The sudden turn made me sway, and he reached out to steady me, his strong hands gently supporting my arms. “Thank you.” I dragged the backs of my hands over my cheeks, wiping away what tears I could, and handed him back his change. There was something so familiar about him... What was it?

“Do you need me?” he asked softly, as the clerk rang up his Vitamin Water.

“What?” I had zero clue what he was talking about.

He flushed. “Do you need me to carry that out? I mean, it looks kind of heavy,” he finished slowly, like he couldn’t believe he’d said it, either.

“It’s a cake.” He had to be the hottest awkward guy I’d ever met.

“Right.” He grabbed his bag and shook his head like he was trying to clear it. “Would you at least let me drive you home?”

Wow, did he choose the wrong day to try to pick me up. “I don’t even know you. I hardly think that’s appropriate.”

A soft smile slid across his face. “You’re December Howard and I’m Josh Walker. I graduated three years ahead of you.”

Josh Walker. Holy shit. High school. Memories crashed

through me, but that Josh Walker couldn't possibly be the one standing in front of me. No, that one had been a tattooed, motorcycle-driving, cheerleader magnet, not this clean-cut all-American nice guy. "Josh Walker. Right. I used to have a picture of you taped on my closet door from when you guys won state." Shit. Why did I say that? His eyebrows raised in surprise, and I mentally added *or still do, but whatever*. "If I remember correctly, you had your head stuck too far up your hockey helmet to notice any underclassmen." But I had noticed him, along with every other girl in school. My eyes narrowed as I assessed the lean cut of his face, only made more angular and freaking hot by quasi-adulthood. "And you had a lot more hair."

His devastating grin cut through the fog of my brain, distracting me from the pain for a blissful moment. How did a hockey player have such straight teeth?

"See, I'm not a stranger." He handed me my cake, and his smile vanished, replaced by a flash of...pain or pity? "Ember, I'm sorry about your dad. Please let me drive you home. You're not in any shape to drive."

I shook my head, tearing my gaze from his sympathetic one. For an instant, I had nearly forgotten. Guilt overran me. I'd just let a pretty face distract me from...everything, and it all came rushing back, shredding into me. What was I doing even thinking about him? I had a boyfriend, and a dead father, and no time for this. Dead. I squeezed my eyes shut against the pain.

"Ember?"

"I need to do it. I need to know I can." I thanked him again for paying and headed back into reality.

I slid onto the frozen leather seat in my car and sat in stunned silence for a moment. How could something as simple as seeing Josh Walker again right a little piece of my soul when the rest

had been flipped so wrong? The cold of the seat seeped through my running capris, forcing out the warm thoughts of Josh. The cake on my front seat mocked me with silly, happy, martial-arts turtles. Gus would love it. If Gus *could* love it. God, what was he going to do without Dad? What were any of us going to do? Panic welled up in my chest, catching in my throat before exploding in a cry that sounded nothing like me. How was I supposed to take care of Mom without Dad? How was I going to do any of this when I wanted to curl up and deny it all?

My composure crumpled, and I sobbed against my steering wheel for exactly five minutes. Then I sat up, dried my tears, and stopped crying. I couldn't afford to cry or break down anymore. I had to take care of my family.