



IN THE LIKELY EVENT

A Novel

REBECCA

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

YARROS

**IN THE
LIKELY
EVENT**

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IN THE LIKELY EVENT

A Novel

REBECCA
YARROS



Montlake

*To my sister, Kate.
I'd go to war for you.
Love you, mean it.*

CHAPTER ONE

NATHANIEL

Kabul, Afghanistan
August 2021

This was not the Maldives.

I closed my eyes and tipped my head back toward the blistering afternoon sun. With the breeze, I could almost pretend the moisture racing down my neck, soaking into my collar, was water from a recent swim instead of my own sweat. Almost.

Instead, I stood on the tarmac in Kabul, wondering how the hell my boots weren't melting into the concrete at this temperature. Maybe missing my trip was karma paying me back for going without her.

"You're supposed to be on leave," a familiar voice said from my right.

"Shhh. I am. See?" I opened one eye just enough to glimpse Torres standing beside me, his thick brow shaded by his multicam cap.

"See what? You standing on the flight line with your head thrown back like you're in a Coppertone commercial?"

The corners of my mouth quirked upward. "It's not the flight line. It's a little bungalow over the water in the Maldives. Can't you hear the waves?"

The rhythmic beat of distant rotors filled the air.

"I hear you losing your mind," he muttered. "Looks like they're here."

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes and searched the horizon for an aircraft on final approach, spotting the plane within seconds.

Here we go again. As much as I used to love the action that came with my job, I had to admit that it was getting old. Peace sounded so much better than constant war.

“How the hell did you let yourself get roped into this, anyway? I thought Jenkins was on this assignment,” Torres asked.

“Jenkins went down with some kind of virus last night, and I didn’t want to ask Ward to skip his leave. He has kids.” I shifted the shoulder strap of my rifle as the C-130 touched down on the runway. “Now I’m on babysitting duty for Senator Lauren’s aide.”

“Well, I’m with you, like always.”

“I appreciate that.”

My best friend hadn’t left my side since Special Forces selection. Hell, even before that.

“Hopefully by next week, Jenkins will be on the mend and I’ll be on my way to the Maldives before the actual senators get here.” I could almost taste those fruity umbrella drinks right now—oh wait, that was the metallic tang of jet fuel. Right.

“You know, most guys I know use their leave time to go home and see their families.” Torres looked back at the rest of the team as they strode our way, straightening their patchless ACUs, like it was possible to unfuck their uniforms after four months in country.

“Well, most guys don’t have my family.” I shrugged. Mom had been gone for five years, and the only reason I’d willingly see my father would be to bury him.

The rest of the team reached us, falling into a line as we faced the aircraft. Graham took the spot on my other side. “Want me driving?”

“Yep,” I answered. I’d already selected the guys I wanted with me until Jenkins got back. Parker and Elston were waiting at the embassy.

“Is everyone here?” Major Webb asked as he reached us, scratching his chin.

“Holy shit! I can’t remember the last time I saw your actual face.” Graham grinned at our commander, his bright smile contrasting with his deep-brown skin.

Webb muttered something about politicians as the plane taxied to the directions of the air traffic controllers.

There were certain perks to being the elite of Special Forces. The informal camaraderie and not having to shave were definitely two of them. Getting screwed out of leave to play security detail to the advance party of some legislators wasn’t. I’d spent an hour this morning familiarizing myself with Greg Newcastle’s file. My assignment was the thirty-three-year-old

deputy chief of staff to Senator Lauren, and he had the polished look of a guy who'd gone straight from Harvard Law to the Hill. The group of them were coming on what they called a "fact-finding" mission so they could report back on how the US withdrawal was going. I somehow doubted they were going to be happy with what they found.

"Just to refresh . . . , " Webb said, taking a folded piece of paper from his pocket and glancing at the designated security team leads. "Maroon, your team has Baker out of Congressman Garcia's office," he began, using our designated for-public-use names for this mission. "Gold, you're on Turner from Congressman Murphy. White, you're on Holt out of Senator Liu's office. Green, you're responsible for Astor out of Senator Lauren's office—"

"I was given Greg Newcastle's file," I interrupted.

Webb glanced down at the paper. "Looks like they made a change last minute. You have Astor now. Mission is still the same. That's the office focusing on the southern provinces. The one working on bringing the girls' chess team to the States."

Astor. My stomach jumped into my throat. There was no way. None.

"Relax," Torres whispered. "It's a common last name."

Right. Besides, the last time I'd heard from her, she was working at some firm in New York, but that was three years ago.

The rain had soaked through my coat—

I clamped down on my reckless thoughts as the plane parked in front of us, guided by the ground crew. Heat radiated off the tarmac in shimmering waves, distorting my vision as the rear door lowered and the pilots powered down the engines.

Uniformed airmen descended from the C-130 first, leading a group of civilians I assumed were the congressional aides and, in one case, helping one of the suits off the ramp.

My brows lifted. *The guy can't get off the ramp by himself and thought it would be a good idea to come tour Afghanistan?*

"Are you serious?" Kellman—or Sergeant White for this mission—scoffed. "Please tell me that's not my guy."

"Here we go," Torres muttered at my side.

I blew out a long breath as I counted to ten, hoping patience would miraculously appear by the time I reached zero. It didn't. This was a waste of our time.

The airmen were all smiles as they walked toward us, obscuring their followers from view. Of course they were happy. They were here to drop off the suits. I highly doubted they'd still be all grins if they were the ones who had to escort clueless, self-important civilians to a bunch of FOBs like they were tourist destinations and not active combat zones.

Major Webb moved forward, and the airmen guided the politicians to the front of their little herd. There were six in all—

My heart. Fucking. Stopped.

I slow-blinked once, then twice as the heat shimmer dissipated with a gust of wind. There was no mistaking that honey-gold hair or that million-dollar smile. I would have bet my life there were deep-brown eyes framed by thick lashes behind those oversize sunglasses. My hands flexed, like they could still feel the curves of her body all these years later.

It was *her*.

“You okay?” Torres asked under his breath. “You look like you’re about to puke up your breakfast.”

No, I wasn’t *okay*. I was about as far away from okay as New York was from Afghanistan. I couldn’t even form words. Ten years had passed since we’d met on a very different tarmac, and the sight of her still left me speechless.

She offered her right hand to Webb to shake and shifted the strap of a familiar army-green cargo backpack higher on her shoulder with her left. She still had that thing? Sunlight caught those fingers and reflected back brighter than a signal mirror.

What. The. Hell. My heart stuttered back to life, pounding in denial so hard the thing *hurt*.

The only woman I’d ever loved was here—in a damned war zone—and she was wearing another man’s ring. She was going to be another man’s *wife*. I didn’t even know the bastard and I already hated him, already knew he wasn’t good enough for her. Not that I was either. That had always been the problem between us.

She turned toward me, her smile faltering as her mouth slackened. Her fingers trembled as she shoved her sunglasses up to the top of her head, revealing a set of wide brown eyes that looked as stunned as I felt.

A vise tightened around my chest.

In my peripherals, Webb worked his way down the line, introducing the politicians to their security details, and coming our way like a nuclear

countdown as we stared at each other. A dozen feet, maybe less, separated us, and the distance was somehow simultaneously too far and way too close.

She walked forward and flinched, then captured her hair in a fist as the wind gusted, blasting every surface with sand and dirt, including the white blouse she'd rolled up her forearms. What the hell was she doing here? She didn't belong here. She belonged in a cushy corner office where nothing could touch her . . . especially me.

"Ms. Astor, meet—" Webb started.

"Nathaniel Phelan," she finished, scanning my face like she might never see it again, like she was cataloging every change, every scar I'd acquired in the last three years.

"Izzy." It was all I could manage with that billion-carat rock flashing at me from her hand like a warning beacon. Who the hell had she said yes to?

"You two know each other?" Webb's eyebrows rose as he glanced between us.

"Yes," I said.

"Not anymore," she answered simultaneously.

Shit.

"Okay?" Webb shuffled his gaze again, noting the awkward moment for what it was. "Is this going to be a problem?"

Yes. A giant problem. A million unspoken words blasted the air between us, as thick and relentless as the sand coming across the flight line.

"Look, I can reassign—" Webb started.

"No," I snapped. There was zero chance in hell I was risking her safety with anyone else. She was stuck with me, whether or not she liked it.

Webb blinked, the only sign of surprise he'd ever give, and glanced at Izzy. "Ms. Astor?"

"It will be fine. Please don't trouble yourself," she responded with an easy, polished, fake-ass smile that sent chills down my spine.

"Okay then," Webb said slowly, then pivoted toward me and mouthed *good luck* before moving on.

Izzy and I stared at each other as every emotion I'd fought to bury over the last three years clawed its way to the surface, ripping open scabs that had never quite healed to scars. Go figure we'd meet again like this. We'd always had a habit of colliding at the worst times and in the most

inconvenient places. It was almost fitting that it was a battlefield this ground.

“I thought you were in New York,” I finally managed to say, my voice coming out like it had been scraped over the pavement a dozen times. *Where no one is actively trying to blow you up.*

“Yeah?” She arched a brow and hefted the slipping pack up to her shoulder. “Funny, because I thought you were dead. Guess we were both wrong.”

CHAPTER TWO

IZZY

Saint Louis
November 2011

“Fifteen A. Fifteen A,” I muttered, scanning the seat numbers as I muddled my way down the crowded aisle of the commuter plane, my carry-on slipping through my clammy hands with every step. Spotting my row, I sighed in relief that the overhead compartment was still empty, then cursed as I realized A was a window seat.

My stomach twisted into a knot. Had I really booked myself by the window? Where I could see every potential disaster coming our way?

Hold up. There was already a guy sitting in the window seat, his head down, only the Saint Louis Blues emblem visible on his hat. Maybe I’d read my ticket wrong.

I made it to my row, stood on my tiptoes, and shoved my carry-on up as far as my arms would extend, aiming for the overhead bin. It made contact with the edge, but the only prayer I had of getting it all the way in was to climb on the seat . . . or grow another six inches.

My hands slipped, and the bright-purple suitcase plummeted toward my face. Before I had time to gasp, a massive hand caught my unruly luggage, stopping it a few inches from my nose.

Holy crap.

“That was close,” a deep voice noted from behind my carry-on. “How about I help you with that?”

“Yes, please,” I answered, scrambling to adjust my hold.

I saw the Blues hat first as the guy somehow managed to twist his body, rise fully to his feet, step into the aisle, and balance my suitcase all in

one smooth motion. *Impressive.*

"Here we go." He slid the carry-on into the overhead with ease.

"Thanks. I was pretty sure it was going to take me out there for a second." I smiled, turning my head slightly to look up—and up—at him.

Whuh. He was . . . hot. Like, pull-the-fire-alarm, jaw-dropping levels of hotness. A fine layer of dark scruff covered a square jawline. Even the cut and the purplish bruise that split the right half of his lower lip didn't detract from his face, because his eyes . . . wow. Just . . . wow. Those crystalline baby blues stole every word out of my head.

And now I was staring, and not the cute, flirty glances Serena would have given him while shamelessly asking for his number and inevitably getting it. No, this was open-mouthed awkward staring that I couldn't seem to stop.

Close your mouth.

Nope, still staring. Staring. Staring.

"Me too," he said, a corner of his mouth lifting slightly.

I blinked. "*Me too, what?*" "I'm sorry?"

His brow knit in confusion. "Me too," he repeated. "I thought that thing was going to smash you in the face."

"Right." I tucked my hair behind my ears, only to remember that I'd pulled it up into a messy bun and therefore had no hair to tuck, which just continued my awkward streak. Awesome. And now my face was on fire, which meant I'd probably turned ten shades of red.

He slid back into his seat, and I realized our exchange had blocked the rest of the flight from boarding.

"Sorry," I muttered to the next passenger, and ducked into fifteen B. "Funny thing, I could have sworn my ticket said I was in the window." I lifted the strap of my purse over my head, then unzipped my jacket and wiggled the least amount possible to get out of the thing. At this rate, I'd probably jab Blue Eyes with my elbow and make an even bigger ass of myself.

"Oh shit." His head swung toward mine, and he winced. "I traded seats with a woman up in seven A so she could sit next to her kid. I bet I took yours by accident." He reached down for an army-green backpack under the seat in front of him, his shoulders so wide that they brushed my left knee as he leaned forward. "Let's switch."

"No!" I blurted.

He stilled, then turned his head slowly to look up at me. “No?”

“I mean, I hate the window. I’m actually really freaked out by flying, so it works better this way.” Crap, I was babbling. “Unless you want the aisle?” I held my breath with hope that he wouldn’t.

He sat back up and shook his head. “No, I’m good here. Freaked out by flying, huh?” There was no mockery in his tone.

“Yep.” Relief sagged my shoulders, and I folded up my jacket, then squished it under the seat in front of me with my purse.

“Why?” he asked. “If you don’t mind me asking?”

My cheeks turned up the heat a notch. “I’ve always been afraid of flying. There’s something about it that just . . .” I shook my head. “I mean statistically, we’re fine. The incident rate last year was one in 1.3 million, which was up from the year before, when it was one in 1.5 million. But, when you think about how many flights there are, I guess that’s not as bad as driving, since your odds of crashing are one in 103, but still, 828 people died last year, and I don’t want to be one of the 828.” *You’re babbling again.* I pressed my lips between my teeth and prayed my brain would cut it out.

“Huh.” Two lines appeared between his eyebrows. “Never thought of it that way.”

“I bet flying doesn’t scare you, does it?” This guy looked like nothing in the world scared him.

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never flown before, but now that you went over the stats, I’m questioning my choices.”

“Oh God. I’m so sorry.” My hands flew to cover my mouth. “I babble when I get nervous. And I have ADHD. And I didn’t take my medication this morning because I put it out on the counter next to my orange juice, but then Serena drank the juice, and I got sidetracked pouring more, and that pill is probably still sitting there—” I cringed, slamming my eyes shut. A deep breath later, I opened them and found him watching me with raised eyebrows. “Sorry. Add in the fact that I overthink just about everything, and here we are. Babbling.”

A small smile crept across his face. “Don’t worry about it. So why get on a plane at all?” He adjusted the airflow above his head, then shoved the black sleeves of his henley up his tan forearms. The guy was built. If his forearms looked like that, I couldn’t help but wonder if the rest of his body followed suit.

“Thanksgiving.” I shrugged. “My parents went on one of those around-the-world cruises after dropping me off for freshman year, and my older sister, Serena, is a junior here at Wash U—she’s studying journalism. Since I’m all the way up at Syracuse, flying made the most sense since we wanted to spend the holiday together. You?”

“I’m headed to basic training at Fort Benning. I’m Nathaniel Phelan, by the way. My friends call me Nate.” The stream of passengers down the aisle had trickled to just the hurried latecomers.

“Hi, Nate. I’m Izzy.” I reached out my hand and he took it. “Izzy Astor.” Not sure how I managed to say my full name when every ounce of my concentration was on the feel of his calloused hand engulfing mine, and the flutter that erupted in my stomach at the warmth of his touch.

I wasn’t one of those people who believed in jolts of electricity at first touch like all the romance novels, but here I was, jolted to my core. His eyes flared slightly, like he’d felt it too. It wasn’t a shock as much as an almost indescribable, sizzling feeling of awareness . . . connection, like the satisfying click of the final puzzle piece.

Serena would have called it fate, but she was a hopeless romantic.

I called it attraction.

“Nice to meet you, Izzy.” He shook my hand slowly, then let go even slower, his fingers waking up every nerve ending in my palm as they fell away. “I’m guessing that’s short for Isabelle?”

“Actually, it’s Isabeau.” I busied myself fastening my buckle and tightening my belt across my hips.

“Isabeau,” he repeated, buckling his own.

“Yep. My mom had a thing for *Ladyhawke*.” The aisle was finally empty. Guess we had everyone aboard.

“What’s *Ladyhawke*?” Nate questioned, his brow furrowing slightly.

“It’s this eighties movie where a couple pisses off an evil medieval bishop because they love each other so much. The bishop wants the girl, but she’s in love with Navarre, so the bishop curses them. Navarre becomes a wolf during the night, and she turns into a hawk during the day, so they only catch a glimpse of the other when the sun rises and sets. Isabeau is the girl—the hawk.” *Stop babbling!* God, why was I like this?

“That sounds . . . tragic.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Transcontinental Airlines Flight 826,” the flight attendant said over the PA system.

“Not completely tragic. They break the curse, so it has a happy ending.” I leaned forward and managed to get my cell phone out of my purse without taking the entire bag out.

Two missed text messages from Serena lit up my screen.

Serena: Txt me when u board

Serena: not kidding!

The messages were fifteen minutes apart.

“If you haven’t already done so, please stow your carry-on luggage in an overhead bin or the seat in front of you. Please take your seat and fasten your seat belt,” the flight attendant continued, her voice chipper but professional.

I tapped out a text to my sister.

Isabeau: boarded

Serena: u had me worried

Smiling, I shook my head. I was the only thing Serena worried about.

Isabeau: worried? Like I’d get lost between security and my gate?

Serena: i never know with u

I wasn’t *that* bad.

Isabeau: I love you. Thank you for this week.

Serena: Love u more. Txt when u land

The announcement continued. “If you’re seated next to an emergency exit, please read the special instructions card located in the seat back in

front of you. If you do not wish to perform the functions described in the event of an emergency, please ask a flight attendant to reseat you.”

I glanced up. “That’s us,” I said to Nate. “We’re in an exit row.”

He looked at the markings on the door, then reached forward for the safety card while the attendant informed the cabin that it was a nonsmoking flight. Had to admit, that only made him cuter.

Nate read while the attendant finished out her announcements and closed the door. My heart rate spiked, the anxiety hitting me right on time. I fumbled with my phone and checked my Instagram and Twitter, then put my device on airplane mode, slipped it into the front pocket of my vest, and zipped the pocket. When my throat went tight, I adjusted the air above me, putting it on max.

Nate put the safety card back into the seat in front of him and settled in, watching what activity there was to see on the ground. The fog was dense this morning, already delaying us twenty minutes.

“Don’t forget your phone,” I said just before the attendant said the same over the intercom. “It has to be on airplane mode.”

“Don’t have a phone, so I’m good there.” He flashed me a smile, then winced, running his tongue over the split in his lip.

“What happened there?” I motioned to my own lip. “If you don’t mind *me* asking this time.”

His smile fell. “I had a slight disagreement with someone. It’s a long story.” He reached for the seat in front of him and took out a paperback from the pocket—*Into Thin Air*, by Jon Krakauer.

He was a reader? This guy just kept getting hotter.

I took the hint and retrieved my own book out of my purse, flipping to the bookmark in the middle of chapter eleven of Jennifer L. Armentrout’s *Half-Blood*.

“Flight attendants, please prepare for gate departure,” a deeper voice said over the PA.

“Is that any good?” Nate asked as the plane backed out of the gate.

“I love it. Though it looks like you might be more of a nonfiction kind of guy.” I nodded toward his reading choice. “How’s that one?” He looked to be about halfway through.

The plane turned to the right and rolled forward, and I took a breath in through my nose and pushed it out through my mouth.