



IN Perfect TIME

A Novel

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Sarah Sundin, *In Perfect Time*
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To my parents, Ronald and Nancy Stewart,
for believing in me and encouraging my dreams

1

Over the Mediterranean March 25, 1944

For Lt. Kay Jobson, flight nursing meant more than physical care. It meant reconnecting a broken soldier with the shards of his humanity.

Kay assessed her planeload of patients en route from Italy to Tunisia. A restless lot, downhearted. That wouldn't do.

She headed to the front of the C-47 cargo plane, past six men confined to litters and eleven in seats along the sides of the fuselage. The soldiers had been wounded on the battered beachhead at Anzio or in one of the many bloody failed attempts to take Cassino. "Say, fellows, what do you think about the '44 baseball season? Starts soon, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it does." Seated to her left, Sergeant Logan gave her a don't-worry-your-pretty-little-head look.

She knelt beside the patient and took his wrist to measure his pulse. What was more fun—showing off what lay inside her pretty little head or shocking people? "Do you think the Cardinals can come back from their World Series loss?"

"Um, sure." One bushy eyebrow sprang high. "But I'm a Tigers fan myself."

Kay rolled her eyes. "Hal Newhouser might be a great

pitcher, but the Cards have Stan Musial, and he batted .357 last season. Mark my words, they'll take the whole shebang this year."

Logan's mouth opened and closed around nonexistent words.

Kay tapped him under the chin. "I don't just follow the game, I play it. If I weren't a nurse, I'd be the star of one of those girls' teams."

"Well, I'll be."

Swishing her hair over her shoulder, Kay turned to the rest of the patients. "So, boys, who do you like this year?"

Over the roar of the twin engines, the men called out their favorite teams and players and stats.

After Kay noted Logan's vital signs, she scooted over to the next patient, a die-hard fan of the Philadelphia Athletics despite their dismal showing in '43. Friendly arguments arced through the stuffy air of the plane, and Kay smiled, her goal accomplished.

She loved everything about this job—the glamour of flight, the challenge of nursing, and the game of lifting spirits. Now she just needed to sweet-talk chief nurse Lt. Cora Lambert into recommending her for the Army Air Forces' chief nurse training program.

If only she could have an in-flight emergency to highlight her skills.

All the fun stuff happened to her friends. Mellie Blake put down a riot and dealt with medical trauma. And three days ago, Georgie Taylor evacuated an entire flight full of patients after her C-47 ditched in the Mediterranean. Kay could hardly be jealous of her friends' crises, but why couldn't a little adventure come her way?

"Improving morale again?" A deep voice rumbled behind her. Lt. Grant Klein, the pilot of the C-47 and one of her boyfriends.

“Always.” She tilted a smile to him. “Shouldn’t you be flying this bird?”

“Singleton’s got it under control. I wanted to talk.” His name and dark good looks used to remind her of Cary Grant, but a little flight time together had dimmed the resemblance in her eyes.

“I’d love to talk, but I’m busy.”

“Come on. Let Dabrowski finish. Just give me a minute.”

Rarely did she give in, but she handed the flight manifest to her surgical technician. “Sergeant Dabrowski, please take vitals while I slap some sense into our pilot.”

“Sure thing.”

Kay took her time leading Grant to the back of the plane. She straightened her gray-blue service jacket, tucked in loose blankets, and lit a patient’s cigarette since no one required oxygen. Grant’s purpose in this conversation was obvious—and futile.

Sure enough, at the back of the plane, Grant leaned one hand against the fuselage behind Kay. “Are you free tonight?”

“Sorry. I have a date.”

“But I haven’t seen you in forever.”

Kay leveled her gaze at him. “It’s Saturday. We went dancing on Wednesday.”

“It feels like forever.” He coiled a strand of her hair around his finger, strawberry blonde around tan, and he leaned in for a kiss.

Although his kisses were delicious, she planted her hand on his chest. “Not in front of the patients. You know that.”

“I also know I need time with you.”

“Not tonight. It’s Harry’s turn, and he hasn’t seen me in two weeks.”

Grant’s eyes narrowed. “You’d rather go out with a dentist than with me?”

“He’s a swell dancer and a lot of fun.”

“And I’m not?”

Oh brother. She stepped to the side and opened the medical chest to get the meds for the litter patients. “Of course you are, but you know how—”

“Come on, baby. I miss you. I never get much time with you.”

That was the idea. Kay pulled out the aspirin bottle. Maybe she should take a tablet herself. “When we started dating, right up front I told you how it would be. I date five or six fellows at a time. I’m not going to change.”

“I don’t want you to change. You’re perfect. But I don’t want to share you anymore. And I want . . .” He cleared his throat.

She faced him, dread slowing her movement and stealing her speech. This wasn’t the kind of in-flight crisis she wanted.

He coughed into his fist, then gave her a silken gaze. “It’s time we . . . it’s time we got closer.”

Kay’s chest tightened. He’d never been pushy, always a gentleman, but now it was over. “I don’t—”

He stepped nearer, his eyes smoky. “You told me when it was time . . .”

“It isn’t time.”

His forehead crumpled into accordion pleats. “But, baby, we’ve been seeing each other almost a year. How much longer? When *will* it be time?”

It never would. When you gave a man your body, you gave him control of your soul. Kay had never fallen into that trap, and she never would. “I need to get back to work.”

He grasped her hand. “How much longer?”

She wiggled her fingers out of his grip. “I don’t know.”

“What about the other fellows? That dentist? Is that why you’re so eager to see him?”

“That is none of your business.”

“I’ll say it’s my business. You’re my—”

“It isn’t your business, and I’m not your anything.” Kay planted her fists on her hips. “We’re no longer dating.”

“What?”

“We’re no longer dating.” She kept her voice calm and low. “I told you from the beginning—no commitment, no pressure. You just broke both rules. That’s the end of it.”

His mouth stretched wide, like a dog aiming to bite something.

She flipped up her hand. “Don’t make a scene. It wouldn’t make a difference anyhow.”

His gaze darted over her head and down the aisle of the plane, where over a dozen patients would relish a scene. A snarl rose in his throat. “Who do you think you are, you little—”

“Don’t. I’ve heard it all before anyway.” She marched down the aisle to her tech. “How are we doing, Sergeant?”

Dabrowski handed her the flight manifest, and she listened to his report on the patients, asked the right questions, and made the proper notations. More importantly, she kept her hands and voice from shaking. Even when Grant stormed past.

Yes, she’d heard it all before. Floozy. Tart. Tease.

Her father’s voice barked in her mind’s ear. Irredeemable little sinner.

Kay sucked in air through her nostrils and knelt beside the patient in the lower litter on the right. “How are you doing, Private?”

Control. Only control silenced the voice.

Sorrento, Italy

“Wake up, Coop. You’re dreaming.”

Lt. Roger Cooper opened one eye, breath chuffing. Yes, he

could breathe. He wasn't trapped underwater in a sinking C-47, sinking because he never should have flown that day. A better pilot would have convinced his squadron commander to abort the mission.

Yes, he lay on his stomach on the beach at Sorrento. The scent of saltwater and sand filled his nostrils. His one open eye registered a sideways view of sheer white cliffs and tile-roofed homes, of the blue Bay of Naples and beyond that—Mount Vesuvius, still smoking from the eruption that brought down his plane. His cheek slipped on his crossed forearms, sweat moistening the leather sleeves of his flight jacket.

Roger kicked to the right and hit his copilot, Lt. Bill Shelby. “Come on, we take a dive in the drink, spend the night at sea, get interrogated for two days straight, finally get a day of rest, and you interrupt my beauty sleep.”

“Hey!” Shell grabbed his skinny leg where Roger had kicked him. “You sounded like my dog, twitching and whimpering.”

“What do you expect? I was chasing bunnies.”

Technical Sergeant Gene Pettas let out a low whistle. “I know what I'd like to chase.”

Roger rested his chin on his forearms and followed his radioman-navigator's gaze down the beach. A trio of Italian girls sauntered along, skirts ruffling around shapely legs, dark eyes surveying the four American flyboys, full lips curving in appreciation.

“One for each of us.” Pettas pushed himself up to sitting. “Except old married man Shell here.”

The tallest, prettiest girl targeted Roger. His dark red hair attracted too much attention in Italy. She paused and lifted an inviting smile. A dangerous smile.

Roger prayed for strength and turned away. “Leave me out of this. They're nothing but trouble.”

Sergeant Fulton Whitaker, the flight engineer, flicked the

back of Roger's head. "Ah, you say that about everything in a skirt."

He rubbed his scalp. "'Cause it's true. Dames are trouble."

"C'mon, Whit." Pettas got to his feet. "Let's go get us some trouble. No fun with these two monks anyway."

One more flick to Roger's head, and Whit left too.

"Man alive." Roger winced and rubbed his head—again. "Everyone's beating me up today."

"Says the man who got nominated for the Distinguished Flying Cross." Shell sat cross-legged on the blanket, and a breeze lifted his wispy pale blond hair.

"Yeah." The word soured in his mouth. Only the US Army Air Forces gave a man a medal for getting out of a situation he never should have gotten into in the first place. He could have killed fifteen people that day. And he got a medal.

"At least I'm finally getting my own plane."

"About time." His best friend was an excellent pilot, better than Roger, but his small stature and quiet personality made him almost invisible in the 64th Troop Carrier Group. Getting trapped on Roger's crew hadn't helped either. "My new copilot will have big shoes to fill."

Shell stretched one leg in front of him and wiggled his foot—about a size seven. "Only if he's twelve years old."

"You kidding? I had bigger feet than that when I was born."

"Yep. They grow them large and stupid on the farm."

"Ain't that the truth?" Roger grinned, then pushed himself up to sitting, naptime over. He rolled his shoulders and gazed around. The midday sun gave off no heat, and Roger kept his flight jacket zipped.

"Say, Coop, you have any candy? Gum?" Shell nodded in the direction Pettas and Whitaker had gone in search of trouble.

Four Italian boys made their way up the beach, laughing and pushing each other and picking stuff up off the sand—

shells or rocks or whatever. Any minute now they'd spot the airmen and beg them for goodies.

A smile warmed Roger's face more than the sun did. "Can't spare any gum, but I've got a Mars bar. Here, give me your book."

"My book? No, you don't." Shell reached for it.

Roger grabbed it first and slipped out his drumsticks from inside his jacket. "It's for a good cause."

"You have no respect for the written word."

"What do you expect from a dumb farm boy?" He set the book on the blanket in front of him and rapped out a neat set of paradiddles.

Sure enough, the boys, about six to ten years old, looked his way. Brothers or cousins most likely.

Roger beckoned them with a grin, breaking the language barrier.

The kids ran over, sand shooting out behind their bare feet. They'd get candy, but first they'd get a show.

Roger twirled one drumstick around his fingers, then broke into a triple stroke roll, smooth and even, building up to a frenzy and ending with a tap to Shelby's head.

His friend cursed and scooted out of the way. "Should have known better."

"That's for waking me."

The boys giggled and gathered around. The littlest patted his own head, an irresistible invitation. Roger motioned for his four new cymbals to sit in a semicircle around him, with the tallest kid to his left, his "hi-hat."

Roger returned to his triple stroke roll, accented with light taps to hi-hat boy's head. The other kids squealed and patted their heads, and Roger obliged them. Then he returned to the book and switched things up to a ratamacue, nice and easy.

His eyes drifted shut, and the rhythm took over, flowing

through his arms and sticks and soul. Thank goodness the Lord had given him one thing to be good at.

That's why he practiced every single day, all forty rudiments, over and over. Not easy when he'd only managed to stuff a single tom-tom in his barracks bag. He hadn't played on a full drum set in ages, but he wouldn't let that stop him. If the Allies ever won this war, he'd go home and audition for the big bands. No more rinky-dink house bands for him.

His right foot worked an imaginary pedal for a bass drum, and he picked up the pace, swinging the rhythm.

The boys murmured in Italian, squirming in expectation.

Roger's eyes popped open. He shot them a mischievous grin, then tapped out a frenzied but gentle pattern on the four little heads. The boys ducked and shrieked with delight.

He laid the sticks in parallel on the book, lowered his chin to signal the end, then stuck out his hand to the oldest boy. "Gum, *per favore?* Gum?"

All four laughed at the role reversal.

"What do you have, Shell?" Roger dug the Mars bar from the pocket of his jacket, a bit squished from his nap, but boys didn't care about things like that.

"A Hershey bar." He handed it to the smallest boy and mimed breaking it in half.

"*Grazie, signore! Grazie!*" Eyes bright, the boys divided the candy and scampered away down the beach.

"The Pied Drummer strikes again."

Roger laughed and returned his drumsticks to his jacket, his fingers still tingling with the rhythm.

"Say, if this drumming thing doesn't work out, you should be a teacher. You're great with kids."

His hand clenched around the sticks, right over his heart. It skipped a beat. His laugh came out stiff. "Why would I want to be stuck in a school all day? Hated school."

Hated it because of dull teachers who made lessons as

tasty as chalk. He'd sit and watch and think how he'd make the lesson engaging with color and humor and flash.

Countless appointments with the principal's paddle showed him color and humor and flash did not belong in the classroom.

But the big bands welcomed it.