


WINGS of GLORY
BOOK ONE

A DISTANT MELODY

A Novel

SARAH
SUNDIN


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Los Angeles, California

Monday, June 22, 1942

One whole delicious week together. Allie Miller clung to her best friend's promise and to the train ticket that would deliver it.

Allie followed an inlaid marble pathway through Union Station and breathed in the glamour of travel and the adventure of her first trip north. Anticipation trilled a song in her heart, but the tune felt thin, a single line of melody with no harmony to make it resonate.

She glanced at her boyfriend, who walked beside her. "I'm sorry you can't come."

Baxter shrugged, gazed at a knot of soldiers they passed, and pulled the cigarette from his mouth. "The war didn't stop just because Betty Jamison decided to get married."

Allie shrank back from the discordant note. Her bridesmaid duty might seem trivial, but she honored it as much as J. Baxter Hicks did his duties as business manager.

They entered the waiting room, which blended Spanish Colonialism and modern streamlining. A wood-beamed ceiling peaked overhead, and iron chandeliers illuminated hundreds

of men in Navy white and blue or Army khaki and olive drab. None of the men cast Allie a second glance. Yet when Mother rose partway from her seat and beckoned with a gloved hand, she attracted dozens of stares with her blonde beauty.

Father gave Allie his seat. “Your ticket? Is it someplace safe?”

“In my handbag.” She smiled at his protectiveness and settled into the deep leather chair. “And yes, Mother, I asked the porter to be careful with my luggage.”

“Good. Oh, the thought of anything happening to that dress.” She clucked her tongue. “Such a shame, this silk shortage, but you did a lovely job with my old ball gown. Why, you almost look pretty in that dress.”

Allie stiffened but said, “Thank you.” Mother meant well, and Allie could hardly expect a compliment. Nevertheless, sadness swelled in her chest. No—self-pity was nothing but pride in disguise, and she refused to indulge.

“So, Stan, any word on that parts shipment?” Baxter and Father strolled away to lean against the wall. The men could pass for father and son with their brown hair and blue eyes, well-tailored suits, and love for Miller Ball Bearings.

Mother picked a piece of lint from the sleeve of Allie’s tan linen suit. “You’ve only been home one month since graduation, and off you go, gallivanting across the state.”

Allie clutched her purse containing the ticket, purchased with the labor of overcoming Mother’s objections. “It’s only one week, and then I’ll be home to stay.”

“Not for long.” Mother directed her large green eyes—the only good trait Allie inherited—toward Baxter. “You’ve been dating almost five years. He’ll propose soon.”

Baxter stood between towering windows, a dark silhouette framed by shafts of light slanting down through the haze of cigarette smoke.

Sourness shriveled Allie's mouth, her throat, her stomach. Did all women feel queasy at the thought of proposals? "Time for the arranged marriage."

"Pardon?"

Allie snapped her attention back to her mother. "That's not what I meant to . . . I meant—"

"Good heavens. You don't think this is arranged, do you?" she asked in a hushed voice. "Yes, Baxter's the only man your father would ever pass his company down to, but your welfare is our highest consideration, and—"

"I know. I know." Tension squeezed Allie's voice up half an octave, and she tried to smile away her mother's worries. "I know Baxter's a gift."

Mother's expression hinted at the approval that eluded Allie. "Isn't he? He's a fine young man and he'll make you so happy."

Happy? Baxter Hicks would never fulfill her childhood dreams of love, but he could give her a family, Lord willing, which would be enough to satisfy. Besides, this marriage was best for her parents, for Baxter, and for Allie herself. A dream made a worthy sacrifice.

So why did her heart strain for the missing notes?



Lt. Walter Novak leaned back against the wall at Union Station, one foot propped on his duffel. The coolness of the wall seeped through the wool of his uniform jacket. Felt good.

Almost as good as the mattress the night before at the home of Frank Kilpatrick, his best friend in the 306th Bombardment Group. His last furlough—ten good nights' sleep, thirty good meals, then back to base and off to combat. Finally he would get to use his God-given talents as a pilot and do something worthwhile.

Walt peered inside his lunch bag. Eileen was awfully nice to make him a chicken salad sandwich. After all, she had her husband home for the first time in months, three whooping little boys, and a belly swollen with another Kilpatrick.

Walt pulled out the best part of the meal—an orange from the Kilpatricks' tree—large and glossy and chockful of sugar. He planted a kiss on the skin, as nubby-smooth as the leather of his flight jacket. “Hello, sweetheart.” To get this prize, he'd used a ladder to bypass dozens of lesser oranges in easy reach. Frank called him pigheaded.

Walt grinned at the memory. “Not pigheaded. Persistent.” After a year of Army food, he longed for fresh fruit. As boys, he and his two older brothers would sprawl on the grass and eat nectarines until Mom pestered them to save some for jam, and they'd sneak plums just before they were ripe and claim the birds must have nabbed them.

A voice on the loudspeaker mumbled something about the Daylight. Walt plopped the orange in the bag, slung his duffel over his shoulder, and worked his way through the lobby as big as a hangar and swarming with servicemen. At his platform, a billow of steam evaporated to reveal the San Joaquin Daylight's black paint with red and orange stripes. Nope, the train wasn't ready for boarding yet.

Walt reined in his excitement, checked in his duffel, and jammed his service cap down over the dumb curl that always flopped onto his forehead. Then he wandered back inside to a newsstand to study the magazines. If he bought *Time*, he'd still have enough money for tipping the porters and for a couple of Cokes on the trip.

A pretty blonde in a blue dress stood in line at the newsstand. Her gaze fixed on the silver wings on Walt's chest and the gold second lieutenant's bars on his shoulders, and a smile dimpled the corner of her mouth.

Walt's throat constricted. Every limb froze in place. He couldn't have spoken even if he'd had something to say, which he didn't. That was why he was stuck kissing oranges.

Frank Kilpatrick, who could make friends with a door-knob, didn't understand, but for Walt, women came in two varieties—those who were taken and those who weren't. And those who weren't taken scared him more than a stalled engine on takeoff.

The young woman's gaze drifted to Walt's face. One nostril flicked up, and she looked away. He knew what she'd seen—the chipmunk cheeks and the Novak nose like an upside-down kite. Yep, unattached women were different. They hunted, scrutinized, judged, and he never measured up.



Allie stepped outside. Steam swirled about, heavy with the smell of burnt oil, and the train chuffed out a beat that quickened her internal melody.

“All aboard!”

Allie turned to her parents. “Thank you for this trip. I can't tell you how much this means—”

“We know,” Father said with a warm smile. “You'd better go if you want a seat. Now, you're sure the Jamisons will meet you in Tracy for that train transfer?”

“Yes, and I have Betty's number and the information on the transfer just in case.”

Mother adjusted the jeweled pin on Allie's lapel. “Remember everything we told you—keep your baggage claim check safe, keep your belongings close, and watch out for servicemen. A uniform alone doesn't make a gentleman.”

Father chuckled. “Mary, you'll give Baxter nightmares about soldiers stealing his girl.”

“Never have to worry about that,” Baxter said.

Allie's tune dropped into a minor key. If only his trust lay in her faithfulness rather than her unattractiveness.

Father engulfed her in a hug. "I'll sure miss you, sweetheart, but have a wonderful time."

In the arms of her lifelong defender, Allie felt her heart rise. Then she turned to Baxter. Surely, he'd be moved by the romance of the train station, the departure, and the couples in sweet embrace.

Baxter bounced a kiss off her cheek. "Go along now. Have fun."

Her heart slumped down into its usual location. Just once to have a man look at her as if she were lovely and special. Just once.

Allie joined the crowd filing onto the train. At the top of the steps, she turned to wave but couldn't see over the Marine behind her. She stepped into the car, coughed at the dense cigarette smoke, and made her way down the aisle, avoiding open seats next to soldiers. The train filled quickly.

"Excuse me, miss. Would you like to join us?" A dark-haired woman indicated the seat facing her, already occupied by two small children. The woman held a baby and sat beside an older boy. "If you don't mind, that is. You'd be a bit cramped, and—"

"That would be lovely. Thank you." Allie settled into the seat of muted red cloth edged with darker red leather.

"I'm tree." The little girl to her right held up four plump fingers.

"Oh, what a big girl you are."

"Humph." The boy next to her thumped his foot against the wall of the train. "She can't even read. I can."

"Barely," said the older boy across from Allie.

"That's enough, children," their mother said. "Don't bother this nice young lady."

“They’re no bother at all.” Allie noticed the woman’s ill-fitting red suit and felt self-conscious of her own elegant outfit. “And . . . and I could help with the children if you’d like.”

“I’d sure appreciate it.” She poked a bottle into the baby’s mouth. “So, where are you going?”

“I’m visiting my best friend in Antioch, up on the Sacramento River Delta. I can’t wait to see her again. Betty was my roommate at Scripps College over in Claremont. She’s getting married, and I’m in the wedding.” Allie cringed at her babbling. Why did she always do that when she was nervous?

“How nice. That’ll be fun for you.” She nudged the boy to her right. “Donnie, pick up your sister’s doll, would you? Lonnie, stop that thumping.”

Allie smiled. This mother didn’t seem to need any assistance.

Then her smile collapsed. A lady stood in the aisle of the packed train, and none of the servicemen offered her a seat. Perhaps they would if she were young and pretty, or a frail grandmother. But she was heavy, middle-aged, and colored.

“Ma’am?” A man stood and motioned to his seat, a man in olive drab with an officer’s cap over black hair.

The lady gave him a big smile, sat down, and grasped his arm. “God bless you. I pray for all you boys in uniform, ask the Almighty to keep you safe. What’s your name, son?”

“Walter, ma’am, and thank you. I’d rather have prayers than a seat any day.” He tipped his cap and stepped forward, closer to Allie, with a smile on his full face.

A uniform might not make a gentleman, but kindness and good manners did. Allie savored this deep new note and the rich chord it produced.