



WINGS *of* GLORY
BOOK THREE

BLUE SKIES TOMORROW

A Novel

SARAH
SUNDIN


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Antioch, California
Wednesday, March 1, 1944

Helen Carlisle strolled up G Street, careful to keep a pained expression. Some days the performance of grief was easier than others, but it was always necessary for her son's sake.

She shifted two-year-old Jay-Jay higher on her hip and inhaled the Delta breeze, flowing fresh from the San Francisco Bay into the Sacramento River Delta, rain-scrubbed and scented by new grass on the hills.

With a bump of her hip, Helen opened the door of Della's Dress Shop and set her notebooks on the table by the door.

From a picture frame on the table, Jim Carlisle smiled up at her—long, lean, and handsome in his Navy blues. The hometown hero. Was he wearing that uniform when a Japanese torpedo slammed into his destroyer off Guadalcanal?

She pressed her fingers to her lips and then to the cold glass over Jim's cold face. But a scan of the shop revealed no sign of her in-laws. Footsteps came from the back room, and the curtain swished open, so Helen repeated the performance, laid another kiss on the portrait, and lifted it for her son. "Give Daddy a kiss."

Jay-Jay mashed his palm over his mouth, making a crunch-

ing sound, and passed the kiss to the father he couldn't remember.

A crunching sound? Jay-Jay's cheeks stretched rounder than usual. "Sweetie, what do you have in your mouth?"

He shook his blond curls, his mouth clamped shut.

"Let Mama see." Helen dropped to her knees, pinned the boy on her lap, and pried open his mouth. He howled and flapped his arms at her.

"Please, sweetie?" Nausea billowed through her. Chunks of slimy gray shell lay in her son's mouth. She'd set him down for a minute, only a minute while she hung the thermometer poster in the window of the Red Cross Branch Office to monitor the War Fund Campaign.

"What are you doing to my grandson?" Della Carlisle's voice fluttered down in waves.

"He—he has a snail in his mouth." Helen whipped a handkerchief from her dress pocket and scooped out the mess, dodging sharp white teeth.

"A snail? Heavens above. Didn't your mommy feed you lunch?"

"Of course, I did. A deviled ham sandwich, an apple, milk."

Jay-Jay squirmed out of her arms. "Gamma!"

Mrs. Carlisle swept him up. "Let's see if Grandma has something that little boys like to eat."

Helen winced and got to her feet. Mrs. Carlisle seemed to be present for any mistake on her part. She wadded up the handkerchief. She'd rinse it out after her shift.

"Oh ho, here's my boy." James Carlisle strode in from the stockroom with the same powerful gait his son used to have. In one fluid motion, he snatched Jay-Jay from Mrs. Carlisle's arms and swung him around for a piggyback ride. "'Snips and snails and puppy-dog tails,' don't you know? It's good for him. Make a man of him."

Mrs. Carlisle eased back into the stockroom.

Jay-Jay squealed as his grandfather galloped and whinnied around a dress rack.

Helen smiled at the affection between the man and his namesake. “Mrs. Carlisle can go home for lunch now. I’ll be here until one.”

“Three.”

The notebooks by the door sang out her lovely plans. “I can only stay an hour. I need to discuss the spring tea with Mrs. Novak, deposit Red Cross funds, take knitting patterns to Dorothy so she can make socks for soldiers, the Junior Red Cross meeting at 3:30—”

He laughed. “And I have to collect rent from my tenants and attend the bank board of directors’ meeting. Three o’clock. Family first.” He let out a horsy snort and trotted off.

How could she complain? Her father-in-law owned her house and let her live there rent free in exchange for a few hours at the store each week. Besides, she had a cute wardrobe at a deep discount. She opened the cash register and rearranged her schedule in her head. This evening she could see Dorothy and Mrs. Novak. The plans for the tea couldn’t wait.

Jay-Jay’s curls bounced as his grandfather galloped around, just as they bounced when he danced with Helen. Tonight she and Jay-Jay wouldn’t have time to dance or read stories or cuddle for bedtime prayers.

A sigh drained from her chest. Why did everything good get taken from her life?

“Mama, look.” Jay-Jay’s peals of laughter blended with the bells on the front door.

“I thought I saw you come in, Helen.” Victor Llewellyn walked to the counter with his clipped stride, although the Navy had driven the stoop from his shoulders, thank goodness.

“Hi, Vic. I heard you were in town.” She stretched her hands over the counter.

He took them, leaned forward, and kissed her on the cheek. “How’s my future wife?”

“I wouldn’t know. Haven’t met her.” Oh dear. Why did he have to start this again? She didn’t want a repeat of his peevish behavior in high school. “I heard the Navy sent you to Port Chicago.”

“The Judge Advocate’s office made me a liaison officer. Not much of a position, but a start.”

“They load ammunition there, right?”

“Right. My job is to iron out tension. All the men are colored and all the officers are white. I’ve received lots of justifiable complaints—lack of recreation, poor working conditions, inappropriate placement. They have a college grad loading ammo. If he were white, he’d be an officer. That’s the Navy for you.”

Helen smiled at Vic, whose hair and eyes were the same shade of brown as iodine.

“But I tell you, it’s boring.” He folded his arms on the counter and winked. “Could use a murder to liven things up.”

She laughed. College, law school, and the Navy had given him more confidence.

“Or a secretary,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m authorized to hire a civilian. Interested?”

“Oh yes. I’m only involved with the Red Cross, Women’s Club, Ladies’ Circle, the Junior Red Cross, and my home. Plenty of time.”

“Too bad.” His face grew serious. “Did Mr. Carlisle tell you we had a talk?”

“A talk?” Helen sought out her father-in-law’s silvery blond head above the dress racks.

Mr. Carlisle approached without Jay-Jay. “Did you ask her?”

“Not yet.” Vic’s mouth twisted. “Didn’t you tell her?”

“I thought you—”

Helen huffed. “Tell me what? Ask me what?”

The men looked at her, then at each other. Vic gave Mr. Carlisle a nod. “You should tell her first.”

Mr. Carlisle gazed down his slim nose at Helen, with his jaw edged forward. “Yes. For Jay-Jay’s sake, it’s time to think about your future. Of course, you’ll never stop mourning Jim . . .”

Helen heard her cue, ducked her head, sifted through pennies in the cash register, and willed up wet eyes.

“Of course not,” he said, voice husky and firm. “But it’s been over a year. You have to think of the boy. He needs a man in the house. It’s time for you to date.”

Helen snapped her gaze to her father-in-law. What made him think a twenty-two-year-old woman needed permission? Then she had a strange sensation, like refugees from Hitler’s Europe must have felt, the joy of freedom and the fear of an unfamiliar world.

“I’m sorry, Helen.” Vic’s forehead bore a V to match his name. “I wanted to give you time to think about this.”

“It’s all right.” Of all the stupid things to say. Yes, she needed time.

“How’s Friday night?”

Helen darted to the rack of new spring dresses. Her left foot drooped, the polio-ruined weakling, and she used her ballet training to make it behave. “I—I can’t, Vic. I can’t.”

He nodded as if he understood, but he rolled his lips between his teeth. Sulking, as he had when she dated Jim.

Mrs. Carlisle bustled in from the back room. “Helen, look what I found the other—oh! Lieutenant Llewellyn, what a pleasant surprise.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Carlisle. I came by to see Helen.”

“I should send that fabric sample for your mother. You can give it to her, can’t you? Oh dear.” She glanced between the back room and the object in her hand. “Oh dear.”

“I can wait.” Vic straightened his blue uniform jacket. “What do you have for Helen?”

“It’s for Jay-Jay’s Daddy book.” She stroked the item in her hand. “I—I cleaned Jimmy’s room yesterday. I found this behind the desk drawer. You know how impulsive Jimmy could be. He forgot about it, never had me sew it on his sash.”

“Yes?” Helen wavered her voice to match her mother-in-law’s.

Mrs. Carlisle lifted her chin and gave the item to Helen. “His Boy Scout badge. Camping or campfires or some such.”

On the cloth disc, yellow and orange and red threads curled in flames. Helen’s fingers coiled around the smooth silver-dollar scar on her right palm, and her eyes watered.

“Such a good little Scout, always active, always—always—you have a picture of Jimmy in his Boy Scout uniform, don’t you, in the scrapbook?”

Helen nodded. Why didn’t the tears quench the fiery pain? Work—she needed to work, the only cure for weakness, the only cure for pain. “I—I need to—”

“I’ll be going,” Vic said. “Port Chicago’s close. I’ll see you around.”

Helen looked up with blurry vision to his resigned face. Would a new romance help? She wanted to find out, but not with Vic. “I’ll see you.”



**Pyote Army Air Base
Pyote, Texas**

Lt. Raymond Novak gazed out the right cockpit window of

the B-17 Flying Fortress to the sleek aluminum wing knifing through the air. “Engine three’s on fire.”

“What?” Lieutenant Flynn leaned forward in the pilot’s seat to look around Ray. “A fire? I don’t see anything.”

“It’s a training flight.”

Flynn’s head drooped back. “Come on, I passed this part. This is a high-altitude bombing flight. Go out, drop the ‘blue pickle,’ go home.”

The blue-painted practice bomb had splattered one hundred pounds of sand and smoke on the desert floor 15,000 feet below, but Ray’s job wasn’t done. He smiled at his trainee. “Expected a milk run, huh? No flak, no fighters, no problems?”

Flynn’s eyelashes fluttered. “We’re in Texas.”

“Yeah, and engine three’s on fire.”

Flynn filled his green rubber oxygen mask with curses. “I know how to handle a fire.”

“Good. You’ll have no problems today.” He put steel in his voice. “You’re off to combat soon. My job is to get you ready.”

The roar of the Fort’s four engines didn’t conceal Flynn’s muttering: “Blind leading the blind.”

Ray’s gloved hands tightened around the wheel. A coward. That’s what Flynn thought, what everyone thought.

He should have joined the chaplaincy like he wanted. A pilot’s silver wings no longer carried prestige without combat ribbons. For four years Ray had put off his dream of being a pastor. He’d worn the uniform of the Army Air Forces, trained hundreds of pilots, and watched fellow instructors die fiery deaths. But he was a coward because he didn’t go to combat. Baloney.

Still, what kind of man trained people to face a situation he hadn’t faced himself? How many men had he trained to kill, to die?

Ray expelled a deep breath. For every man in combat, dozens toiled behind the scenes. Were their jobs less important? Were they all cowards? No, and neither was he.

He shook his head to rid himself of the niggling feeling, but it remained. It always remained. “Fire in engine three, Flynn. You’ll lose the wing. What do you do?”



“At ease, Lieutenant Novak.”

“Yes, sir.” Ray sat facing the desk of his commanding officer, Colonel Beckett.

The CO tugged down his olive drab uniform jacket, temporarily closing the gaps between brass buttons. He cleared his throat and shuffled papers.

Ray unzipped his leather flight jacket and studied the officer, the thinning dark hair, the loose jowls, the unreadable expression. Why had he summoned Ray? Perhaps he wanted his opinion of Lieutenant Flynn. The other instructors had lost patience with him.

Colonel Beckett lifted a smile, wide mouthed and wide eyed. “I have good news for you.”

Good news? Not with that face. Dr. Jamison had worn that face when he told Ray he could get out of junior high gym—because his leg was broken. Dolores Eaton had worn that face when she said Ray wouldn’t have to support her expensive tastes—because she was returning his ring.

Ray slid his hands down his thighs to grip his knees. “News?”

“You know what things are like in the Training Command lately. You’ve been an instructor a long time, haven’t you?”

“Yes, sir. Over four years.”

“Four years. Four years.” Colonel Beckett flipped through papers with thick fingers. “Yes, advanced training at Kelly

Field, B-17 transition training, now here at the Replacement Training Unit. Say, you must be ready to get out of this instructor assignment.”

Out? Until the war ended, the only way out was gross misconduct, medical discharge, or death. As much as he hated military life, Ray would rather stay in for the duration.

The colonel tapped the papers on edge to neaten the stack. “Thousands of pilots have returned stateside after combat tours. We want to use their valuable experience.”

“Yes, sir. Some of them make excellent instructors.” And some didn’t.

“I’m glad you see things our way.” The phony grin returned. “You can understand why the Training Command now requires that all pilot instructors have combat experience.”

Ray pulled up handfuls of olive drab wool over his knees. “All?”

“You’re from California. Antioch—had to look that up on the map. I found you a plum assignment at the Sacramento Air Depot. I convinced your new CO to grant you full weekend passes. How would you like that? Home-cooked meals, fishing, the girl next door?”

The girl next door was nine. “What would I—the air depot?”

“Supply officer. Can’t beat that. No dangerous flights, no cocky—”

“No flying? Sir, I love flying. I love teaching. I know nothing about supply.”

“You’ll be trained. Fully trained. Plum new assignment.”

“Supply?” A warehouse of crates, forms to type in triplicate, a mountain of paperwork—what could be worse?

Beckett tucked Ray’s papers in a manila folder. “Let’s be realistic. You can only return to the Training Command if you fly a combat tour. And you’re—what?—thirty-one? You don’t want to go to combat.”

“No, sir,” Ray said through clenched teeth. Combat would indeed be worse than a warehouse.

“The Training Command has become the reward for heroes. Can’t all of us be heroes.”

“No, sir.” Ray braced himself against the sting. He was the only Novak brother who wasn’t a hero. His younger brother, Jack, flew a B-17 into Pearl Harbor during the attack and now flew with the Eighth Air Force in England. His baby brother, Walt, had lost an arm to Nazi bullets in an air battle over Germany. But Ray? Ray hid in an instructor position. No, in supply.

Colonel Beckett set Ray’s file on the corner of the desk, his fate decided.

Ray stood, turned on his heel, and headed outside. He pulled his little black leather notebook from his shirt pocket and jotted down “Never smile when giving bad news.” Maybe he could use the story in a sermon someday.

He lifted his head to the sky he’d been shot out of, without a parachute. High above, cirrus clouds streaked tire treads across the crisp blue.

“Lord, help me see the good in this.” He needed to find the lining to this cloud, but right now it looked more gray than silver.

2

Antioch

Friday, March 10, 1944

Helen pedaled down Sixth Street, harder with the left leg than the right, punishing the left leg for its weakness, as she'd learned on the polio ward and in Madame Ivanova's ballet studio.

She'd already visited the bank, the grocery, and the Red Cross office. Antioch had only raised one thousand dollars for this month's War Fund Campaign—a long way from the ten-thousand-dollar goal, and Helen needed to motivate the ladies. First she had to pick up those socks from Dorothy Wayne and review the Ladies' Circle agenda with Mrs. Novak before picking up Jay-Jay at her sister's house.

A gust of Delta wind blew plum blossoms from the Fergusons' tree, which billowed about Helen in a pale pink blizzard. At the risk of looking as callous as Scarlett O'Hara tapping her dancing feet in her widow's weeds, Helen let laughter bubble from deep inside. With the Carlisles' permission to date, someday she might shed the heavy restraints of widowhood as she had her old leg braces.

Of course, wartime pickings were slim. As the song said,

“They’re Either Too Young or Too Old.” Or they were Victor Llewellyn.

Petals brushed her cheek. She coasted down a slight incline, kicked her feet off the pedals, and laughed again. Why not? No one could hear her.

“Beautiful day.”

Helen jerked back her attention. On the other side of the street, an Army officer walked down the sidewalk.

Ray Novak tipped his cap over his black hair. “Hi, Helen.”

“Hi.” She raised one hand from the handlebars. Should she wave? Salute?

The bike wheel wobbled. No, she should steer.

Helen groped for the pedals and handlebars, but sky and branches and asphalt rushed around. Her left leg gave out under her, the traitor, then the left wrist, and she crumpled to the ground. Many years’ experience restrained her cry.

Clumsy cripple Helen,
Ugly as a melon.
Trips on hairs, falls down stairs,
Clumsy cripple Helen.

She groaned, shoved blonde hair from her eyes, and tugged her skirt into place.

Footsteps ran to her rescue. “Are you all right?” Ray pulled the bike away and offered his hand.

“I’m fine.” When she took his broad hand, warmth rushed down her arm from that silly childhood crush.

Back on her feet, she stumbled, her shoe halfway off.

Ray caught her by the elbow. “Careful there.”

“Thanks.” She worked her heel back into her espadrille and looked up into his face. What a kind face with unusual gray eyes, soft as a rain cloud.

Those eyes narrowed. “Are you hurt?”

The soreness in her left ankle indicated a bruise, while her left wrist throbbed. She wiggled her fingers—good range of motion. “My foot’s fine. My wrist is sprained, not broken.”

He chuckled. “Spoken as Dr. Jamison’s daughter.”

“Spoken as his perennial patient.” Goodness, she stood too close to him. No one was around, but she stepped back anyway.

“We should get you to his office. Wait, he got drafted into the Medical Corps, didn’t he?”

“Mm-hmm. Washington DC. Mama went with him.”

“Dr. Dozier or Dr. Libbey?”

“Oh, I’m fine. Besides, I need to finish my errands, pick up my son at Betty’s house, and get these groceries home.”

“We’ve had this conversation before.” He tipped a smile. “How old were you? Ten?”

Helen’s mouth drifted open at the memory of the handsome college man carrying her, with her sprained ankle, to her father’s office after another bike accident. No wonder she’d had a crush on him. “Oh no. You don’t remember that, do you?”

“Of course. How could I forget taking the doctor’s daughter to a doctor?” He plucked plum blossoms from her hair. “And how can I forget helping a pretty girl with flowers in her hair?”

Her shoulders went limp. He was so romantic, and she was a clumsy fool. She hadn’t hurt herself in ages, not since the night of George and Betty’s wedding. Jim’s last furlough.

She brushed off the sleeves and skirt of her brown suit. “I’m a mess.”

“You look fine.”

Now to brush off the attention. “Your mother told me about your transfer. You must be pleased.”

Ray grimaced and twisted his head to one side. “Afraid

not. I've been put out in the most boring pasture in the world. No flying, no preaching. Still looking for that silver lining."

Helen had always liked how Ray talked to her as an adult, even when she was six. "You'll find it. If you don't, I'll knit you one."

Barks and growls sounded behind her.

She whirled around. A beagle and a mangy gray terrier played tug-of-war with a paper-wrapped package. "My pork chops!"

"Hey!" Ray rushed them, stomped his feet, and flailed his arms. "Drop that."

A yelp, and the terrier took off with the meat, the beagle nipping at his heels.

"Stupid mutts." Ray sprinted after them.

"Ray, stop." Helen laughed despite the loss of two ration points. At least the point value for pork had dropped that month. "Even if they listened, I wouldn't want it."

He turned back, his chin dipped in laughter. "Guess not."

"Thanks for trying."

He returned, wagging his head. "I've always prided myself on my peacemaking skills, but dogs don't listen to reason."

Helen laughed and picked up her scattered groceries. She held up a square tin. "At least they left the Spam."

"Quiet. They'll be back." He lifted her bike and swung down the kickstand. "Say, too bad about the meat."

Helen picked up her Ladies' Circle notebook. "Just as well. Jay-Jay and I don't like pork chops."

Ray fetched a can of soup from the middle of the street. "Why did you buy them?"

"It's Friday."

"Friday?"

"Friday's pork chop night for the Carlises."

Ray walked over to the bike, tossing the can up and down

like a baseball, his mouth pursed. "Routine's comforting, isn't it?"

She gazed into his understanding face. "Well, yes, it is."

He took the Spam and the notebook from her and arranged them in the basket. "You may not like pork chops, but you like eating pork chops on Friday nights."

"I suppose so. I never thought about it."

"Where to?" He took the handlebars. "I'll walk the bike. You can't ride with that wrist. Besides, I need to knock these handlebars into position."

"Again?" A little smile rolled up her lips.

"At least you won't get in trouble with your dad this time."

"No, thank goodness."

"Where to?"

Helen massaged her sore wrist. "Home, please." She couldn't bother him with her errands. She'd finish later on foot. Dorothy, Betty, Mrs. Novak. Oh dear. How could she visit Mrs. Novak? Wouldn't it look as if she'd followed Ray?

"And home is . . . ?"

She laughed. "Sorry. I forgot you haven't been around. I'm at Seventh and D."

He pushed the bike down Sixth Street. "Any other routines?"

She crossed a strip of grass and headed down the sidewalk. "Where do I start? Routines, schedules, lists. I couldn't get anything done without them."

"You're well-disciplined."

Helen shrugged. "Betty says I overdo it. She says I'm Martha and she's Mary."

Ray grinned at her. "Is she right?"

"Perhaps. But without Marthas in this world, nothing would get done."

"True. If we were all like Betty . . . She's always struck me

as sort of . . .” He gazed up as if searching for the right word among the clouds.

“A flibbertigibbet.”

Ray laughed. “Boy, you two are tough on each other.”

“We’re sisters. We love each other.”

“That’s the key, isn’t it? Connection. Love.” His eyes darted about, and then he rested the bike against his side and reached into the pocket of his khaki uniform shirt. “Excuse me. I have to write something down.”

“I didn’t realize I was quotable.”

He glanced at her from under dark eyebrows, flashed a smile, and scribbled in his notebook. “Sorry. Bad habit.”

“Why? If you have an idea, it’s best to write it down before you forget.”

“Sermon ideas. It’s stupid. The way this war’s going, I won’t be able to give a sermon for years.”

Helen rose up and down on her toes, little ballet exercises called *relevés* to strengthen her calves. “All the more reason to take notes. You have experiences in the Army you’d never have as a civilian. When the war’s over, you’ll have a treasure trove.”

He raised a long, steady gaze and caught her in full *relevé*. She lowered her heels. His gaze didn’t budge as he tucked away his notebook. “Dolores didn’t share your view.”

Dolores. Helen knew that name and didn’t like it. How could any woman break an engagement, break the heart of this sweet man? “I don’t understand. You’re a pastor. Even as a teenager, you were a pastor. You visited me when I—I was sick, cheered me on as I learned to—to walk again, and besides, you have to keep up your skills, right?”

He guided the bike around the corner onto D Street. “My skills? That’s part of it, but it’s more than that, deeper than that. Sometimes I think if I can’t put pen to paper each day,

a part of me will shrivel and die.” He chuckled. “Sounds strange, I guess.”

“No. It’s your heart’s work.”

“My heart’s work.” He gazed up through the tree branches. “That fits.”

“You can’t deny your heart’s work. I denied mine for years.”

He gave her a quizzical look.

Helen chewed on her lips. “Jim—well, he liked to keep me to himself, so I gave up volunteer work. But I missed it. I wasn’t myself without meetings and committees and something to give my life purpose. Not that being a wife and mother wasn’t—”

“But you weren’t doing your heart’s work.”

She released her breath. “No, I wasn’t. Then when Jim died, I went back to what I enjoy.” Oh no, her voice didn’t quaver, not one bit.

Ray didn’t look shocked. “Good thing. Mom tells me how much you do for the church, the Red Cross—I’m sure I missed something.”

Helen stopped on the driveway beside her little cream bungalow. “Only my house. Here we are.” She led him up the driveway to the garage set back from the house.

Ray propped up the bike and raised the garage door. “Just need a wrench.”

“Oh, leave it. I’ll have my brother-in-law—”

“Won’t take long.” He poked around in the mess on the tool bench.

Helen unbuckled her bike basket to take her groceries into the house.

“Let me get that,” he said. “You shouldn’t carry anything.”

“I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt anymore.” The pain in her wrist had dulled to warmth, nothing to speak of.

Without a word, Ray unbuckled the last strap and carried the basket toward the kitchen door on the side of the house.

“No, really. I’ll do it.” She followed as fast as her sore ankle allowed. What if someone saw? “Please, Ray. Please let me.”

“Don’t you know the Novaks are a stubborn lot?” He climbed three steps and crossed the threshold of her home.

Helen clutched the stair railing, unable to breathe. Did anyone see him go in? Mrs. Llewellyn across the street could never keep her mouth shut.

“On the counter okay?”

Helen pumped air into her lungs, hitched up a smile, and entered the kitchen. “Sure.”

Ray pulled groceries out of the basket. “Anything need to go in the icebox?”

“Not anymore,” she said, pleased at her breezy tone. Why worry? The kitchen window faced the backyard.

“Dumb dogs.” He settled his gaze on her. “Say, what’ll you do for dinner?”

She picked up the Spam and the tomato soup with a flourish and a cheesy smile. If she wore her ruffled apron, she’d be ready for an ad in *Good Housekeeping*. “Why, I’m all set.”

Ray stepped closer and took the cans in a move strangely and wonderfully intimate. “I have a better idea.”