



SUNRISE *at* NORMANDY  
ONE

*the*  
SEA BEFORE US

SARAH  
SUNDIN



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
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Sarah Sundin, *The Sea Before Us*  
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To my oldest son, Stephen—  
Thank you for your support, encouragement,  
and your steady strength . . . and for alerting  
the world to the danger of squirrels.

Special Order of the Day  
to the Officers and Men  
of the Allied Naval Expeditionary Force

*31 May 1944*

It is to be our privilege to take part in the greatest amphibious operation in history—a necessary preliminary to the opening of the Western Front in Europe which, in conjunction with the great Russian advance, will crush the fighting power of Germany.

This is the opportunity which we have long awaited and which must be seized and pursued with relentless determination: the hopes and prayers of the free world and of the enslaved peoples of Europe will be with us and we cannot fail them.

Our task . . . is to carry the Allied Expeditionary Force to the Continent, to establish it there in a secure bridgehead and to build it up and maintain it. . . .

Let no one underestimate the magnitude of the task. . . .

I count on every man to do his utmost to ensure the success of this great enterprise which is the climax of the European war.

Good luck to you all and God speed.

---

Admiral Sir Bertram H. Ramsay  
Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief,  
Expeditionary Force

# Prologue

KERRVILLE, TEXAS  
SATURDAY, JUNE 14, 1941

Wyatt Paxton never realized coming home could be as bittersweet as leaving.

He climbed the wooded hill that overlooked Kerrville, his two younger brothers and their girlfriends behind him. After four years in college, he thought he'd be ready to become his father's manager at Paxton Trucking, and he thought he'd be over Oralee Bates.

He wasn't and he wasn't.

An oak branch dipped low in the pathway. Wyatt pulled it aside for the rest of the party. "When was the last time we boys came up here to our Celebration Point?"

"Two years." His younger brother Adler passed him with a smile. He and Wyatt had inherited fair coloring from Daddy and their mother, a woman they only knew from photos. "I was celebrating heading off to college."

"It was my high school graduation, Ad." Clay, the youngest brother, gave Adler a playful punch on the shoulder. His dark good looks hailed from Wyatt's stepmother and her Ramirez clan. "And the start of my servitude at the office. Now finished, hallelujah."

Wyatt grinned at Clay, who would soon be studying medicine.

All three sons had worked for Daddy for two years after high school to earn their tuition money.

“Wait up, boys. Ellen’s got a pebble in her shoe.”

For half a second, Wyatt noticed Clay’s pretty blonde girlfriend fussing with her shoe, but then his gaze drifted to Oralee. Always to Oralee. Gentle and strong. And engaged to Adler.

He gripped the rough branch. Adler and Oralee had been together seven years. They’d be married in August. When would it stop hurting?

Ellen worked her shoe back on, and the ladies passed Wyatt.

“Thanks, Wy.” Oralee smiled, her brown eyes sweeter than Mama’s flan. Then the tall brunette darted to Adler, slipped her hand in his, and leaned against his shoulder, her sunny yellow dress swishing about shapely knees.

Wyatt released the branch and jogged to the head of the line. Better to have the lovebirds behind him than in front.

Adler chuckled. “Always have to be first, don’t you, Wy?”

Wyatt’s shoulders tensed. Adler should talk. From the moment he came out of the womb, he’d been nipping at Wyatt’s heels. Besting him in grades, in home runs, at Paxton Trucking, and stealing the woman he loved.

He blew out a long breath. Not entirely true. Sure, Wyatt had met Oralee first, but while he was working up the nerve to ask her out, Adler swooped in, never hesitating, never failing.

Wyatt had to admit, Adler and Oralee were good together.

He rounded the bend and stopped. He’d forgotten about the footbridge. A chasm cut through the side of the hill, spanned by an old two-by-eight.

“Rats.” They’d never brought the ladies up here.

“We don’t have to cross this, do we?” Oralee stared at the plank. She and Ellen wore fancy dresses and heels from Wyatt’s college graduation party this afternoon.

“You know, this is a good enough place right here.” Wyatt swept

his hand to the west. “Got a clear spot to roast our marshmallows, and we’ll be able to see the sunset just fine.”

Adler snorted. “Good enough? Not when we’ve got the best view in the Texas Hill Country up yonder.”

Oralee gripped her hands in front of her stomach. “It doesn’t look safe.”

“I’ll go.” Ellen gave Adler a saucy smile. “I’m not scared.”

“See, darlin’?” Adler lifted Oralee’s hands and kissed them. “Nothing to worry about. We’ve crossed this bridge hundreds of times.”

“But there’s nothing to hold on to and—”

“Come on, darlin’. For me?”

Wyatt’s chest tightened. All his life, Adler got his way through charming people and cajoling them, and it wasn’t right.

Oralee peered into the ravine, her forehead rippling. “I—I don’t want to. It doesn’t look safe, and you know how clumsy I am.”

“You’ll be fine. No reason to be scared. And wait until you see the view.”

Indignation burned in Wyatt’s gut. Why wouldn’t Adler listen to her? “The view’s fine here. Don’t push her to do something she doesn’t want to.”

Adler dropped his fiancée’s hands and stepped around her, his pale blue eyes narrowed at Wyatt. “Thought by now you’d have outgrown being a scaredy-cat.”

Oralee hugged his arm. “Adler . . .”

Wyatt’s jaw jutted out. “Thought by now you’d have outgrown calling people names.”

“When it fits.”

“It’s not being scared. It’s being cautious, protecting people.”

“Hey . . .” Clay’s nervous laugh filtered through. “We’re supposed to be celebrating, not fighting.”

“Yeah?” Adler’s gaze stayed fixed on Wyatt. “Tell that to Mr. Busybody, thinks he knows better than everyone else ’cause he’s two years older.”

He took a step closer. "Maybe I do. If you think it's right to coax a girl to cross a little footbridge in high heels, then—"

"Stop it." Oralee stepped between them and pulled on Adler's sleeve. "Please don't fight."

Adler eased her aside, never breaking his gaze with Wyatt. "Out of the way, darlin'. This has nothing to do with you."

No, it didn't. It wasn't about the bridge. It wasn't even about Oralee. "You've just got to have your way, don't you?"

Adler closed the distance, his nose inches from Wyatt's. "And you don't? Listen to you, so high-and-mighty, marching around, giving orders."

"Orders?" Wyatt bumped his chest into his brother's. "I'm trying to protect her 'cause you won't. Can't you see she's scared? Can't you listen to someone else for a change?"

"Stop it!" Oralee's voice came from behind him, near the bridge. "Stop arguing."

"It's not your job to protect her. It's mine." Adler shoved Wyatt, his eyes ablaze. "Get out of my business."

Wyatt shoved him back. Felt good. "I will when you start treating your girl right."

"Stop it," Oralee cried. "He treats me fine, Wy. Just fine."

"You heard her." Another shove from Adler.

"Yeah?" Wyatt pointed to the rickety old plank. "If you love her, stop forcing her to do something she doesn't want to. Protect her for a change."

"Stop it, you two. Look, I'm going. I'll go. Please stop fighting." Oralee placed one foot on the bridge, a breeze lifting her brown curls.

"Oralee!" Wyatt yelled. "Don't. You don't have to."

She tossed her curls. "I can take care of myself, Wyatt Paxton."

"See?" Adler punched his arm. "She can do it. Can't you, darlin'?"

"I can." But her foot wobbled, and she barely caught herself.

Wyatt lunged forward. "Oralee, don't."



“Leave me alone, Wy. I’m fine.” Then her heel slipped, and she tottered, her arms seesawing.

“No!” Wyatt grabbed her hand.

“Stop it! Leave me alone.” She yanked her hand free.

Then the fury in her eyes melted into terror, and she fell—away from him—her hand and her gaze and her scream stretching to him, but he couldn’t—he couldn’t reach her.

A crack ended her scream. Arms, legs, yellow skirt, brown curls rolled and bounced, then came to a rest, sprawled and twisted over blood-spattered rocks.

Wyatt’s hand turned to ice, curled useless before him, and a guttural cry rasped over his throat.

“Oralee!” Adler screamed, and he scrambled down the rocks. “Oralee!”

“Careful.” Clay followed his brother. “Don’t touch her. You could make it worse. Wait for me.”

What had he done? Wyatt stood, every muscle frozen. He wanted to protect Oralee, and he’d . . . he’d . . .

“Oralee? Say something, darlin’. Say something.” About fifteen feet below, Adler hunched over her, hands spread wide, not touching, obeying the future physician.

“Oralee?” Clay gently brushed curls from her eyes, her wide, unblinking eyes.

“No . . .” Wyatt’s chest convulsed. What had he done? What had he done?

Wailing rose beside him—Ellen, down on her knees.

Clay pressed his fingers to Oralee’s neck, his head bowing lower and lower. “I’m sorry, Adler. You and I—we’ll stay with her. Wyatt, go fetch the doctor, the sheriff, tell—”

“Noooo!” Adler roared. His arms, stretched in a benediction over the woman he loved, now arched, knotted, an eagle’s wings rising to find prey. And he turned to Wyatt. “You did this.”

“I—I wanted—I was trying to protect—”

“You killed her!”

As if that two-by-eight had slammed him in the chest.

Adler clawed his way up the ravine, his face twisted. “You—you always wanted her, couldn’t have her, so you—” A primal cry ripped the air, as old as Cain and Esau and the brothers of Joseph.

Wyatt couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move.

That cry grew, and Adler burst over the ledge, gripping a rock the size of a baseball.

Adler Paxton’s fastball had struck out the best batters in Texas.

Pain shrieked across Wyatt’s left cheek, spun him sideways. He cried out, stumbled, fell to his knees, his hands braced on the rocky soil.

“Don’t, Adler!” Ellen screamed. “You’ll go to jail, to the electric chair.”

Wyatt twisted his head, and a rusty taste filled his mouth.

Adler approached, a stone lifted overhead, his features unrecognizable in his grief and fury.

“Oh, Lord . . .” Wyatt didn’t want to die, but he didn’t want to live either.

“Don’t!” Clay charged from behind and tackled Adler, slammed him to the ground. “Get out of here, Wy. Get Daddy. I’ll hold him.”

“Get off me, Clay.” Adler struggled, but he was no match for the county wrestling champ. “Don’t stop me. Get off.”

Wyatt’s breath returned, heaving humid air into his lungs.

“Run, Wy.” Clay pinned Adler’s arm behind his back. “Run!”

With one grateful nod, Wyatt lurched to his feet. His legs felt as loose as water, but he moved them, and he ran down that hill faster than the Guadalupe River during a flood, arms pumping, lungs hauling in survival, mind reeling, focusing, planning. Three things he had to do.

Get Daddy.

Get money.

Get away.



KENSINGTON, LONDON, ENGLAND  
FRIDAY, JANUARY 14, 1944

Second Officer Dorothy Fairfax slathered a thick layer of orange marmalade on the buttered toast and slid the plate in front of her father. “I had enough ration coupons for sausage and your favorite Fortnum & Mason’s marmalade. If you don’t eat your breakfast, I shall feed it to Charlie with no regret or shame.”

Papa glanced from the *Daily Telegraph* to the Scottish terrier dancing by his chair. After an interminable minute, he took a bite.

Dorothy released her breath and sent a smile to Mrs. Bromley. The elderly housekeeper slipped back into the kitchen.

She spread a thin layer of marmalade on her unbuttered toast, her stomach hopping as gleefully as little Bonnie Prince Charlie. “I have the most splendid news. Quite a bit of change at headquarters. New commanders and staff are reporting—British and Americans, army and navy and air.” If only she could tell him more about her duties with the Women’s Royal Naval Service. Knowing the Allies would invade France in May might bring color back to those gaunt cheeks. But as a Royal Navy veteran, Papa understood the need for secrecy.

However, her news wasn’t classified. “You’ll never guess who’s reporting to my unit.”

Dorothy waited, but Papa kept reading the *Telegraph* as she knew he would. "Why, it's Lawrence Eaton."

The sound of his name was the sweetest music.

Papa looked her full in the eye.

The shock of it. When had he last looked at her?

His blue eyes clouded over, and Dorothy's heart shriveled. The wrong Fairfax child sat before him, and he couldn't abide the sight of her.

Then his brow wrinkled. "Lawrence . . . ?"

"Eaton." She brightened for her father's sake and at the name of the man she'd loved since she was fourteen years old. "You remember. He stayed with us on holidays. He was a Cambridge chum of—"

"I remember." The newspaper rose between them.

Dorothy bit into her toast, the marmalade sour on her tongue. She mustn't be hasty in speaking, not when she'd waited ten years for Lawrence to come back into her life. "It would be lovely to have him over for—"

"No." A page flipped.

Every muscle in her face wanted to assume an unladylike expression, but she restrained herself. If they could entertain Lawrence, he'd see she'd grown up, and his clever conversation would cheer Papa.

Or would Lawrence's presence only remind Papa of her brothers?

The newspaper rustled. "I do wish you wouldn't wear so much face powder. I thought I made my opinion clear on that matter."

She winced. "Yes, but the Royal Navy likes the Wrens to look smart." And Lawrence Eaton would never look at her if she were covered in freckles.

The sausage on her plate bent in an accusatory frown. He also wouldn't look at her if she were fat again.

However, it was against the law to waste food, so she finished her breakfast. "Will you be going to the office to—"

"No."

Papa only went to the office once or twice a week now. How did Fairfax & Sons stay afloat without Reginald Fairfax at the helm? James Montague was an excellent manager, but he shouldn't have to perform Papa's duties as well as his own.

Dorothy stood and straightened her double-breasted navy blue uniform jacket. "Have a good day, Papa." She kissed his forehead, his hair tickling her cheek. Once as brilliant red as her own, now graying and dulled.

He had been such a robust man.

Before the war.



LONDON

SATURDAY, JANUARY 15, 1944

Only \$437.24 until Lt. Wyatt Paxton could go home.

He subtracted the cost of the Underground fare from his savings and tucked his notepad in the breast pocket of his dress blues. He hated to add to his debt, but how could he spoil his buddies' fun their first full day in London?

Besides, he'd always wanted to see these landmarks—Big Ben, Parliament, Westminster Abbey—all within his line of sight. Ancient spires disappeared in thick fog straight out of Dickens or Sherlock Holmes. Wyatt sank his gloved hands in the pockets of his overcoat and shivered from the privilege of being in this historic city. He didn't deserve it.

"Too cold for your blood?" Lt. Jack Vale nudged him as they walked down a sidewalk edged by carved stone pillars.

Wyatt would never admit it to his best friend, but the cold stung like yellow jackets. Nevertheless, he sent a grin over his shoulder to their fellow officers, Jerry Hobson and Ted Kelvin. "Dakota here's jealous that the sun prefers my home state to his."

Ted turned up the collar of his navy blue overcoat. "At least you two served in the Aleutians. You're used to the cold."

"You'll get used to it," Jack said. "If only we could get used to walking on the left side of the sidewalk."

Yep, Wyatt kept drifting to the right. The men turned the corner and strolled beside the Houses of Parliament. The area teemed with civilians and servicemen in every sort of uniform.

"Wonder what we'll do here." Hobson adjusted his officer's cover over his black hair.

"They'll brief us on Monday," Ted said.

"Think about it." Hobson gestured at Wyatt. "You were a gunnery officer. Jack, you were a communications officer. Ted, you fought U-boats in the Atlantic. And I manned a landing ship at Sicily and Salerno."

"That's enough speculating." Wyatt softened the warning with a smile. "Whatever we do, I have a notion it'll be big."

The other officers nodded.

Spring would arrive soon, the perfect time for the Allies to invade Nazi-occupied Europe. Now was the time to plan and prepare.

"A newsstand." Ted pointed ahead. "I need to get postcards for my wife and kids."

Wyatt hung back and checked his watch. Only one minute until the clock on Big Ben would toll twelve. He couldn't wait.

"Say, Wyatt, aren't you buying postcards for your family?" Ted held up a selection.

Wyatt's chest seized, and Jack shot him a look.

He couldn't explain. Not today. Today was meant to be fun.

"Say, Ted. How about this for your little boy?" Jack held up a card.

The distraction worked, and Wyatt thanked Jack with a smile. Soon he'd tell his new friends what Jack already knew. That he hadn't been home for two and a half years. That he hadn't written. That his family had no idea where he was or what he was doing.

He'd also tell them why. Daddy always said keeping secrets was

as stupid as keeping gophers. All they'd do is pop up and poke holes in your life.

The familiar ache filled his chest. Boy, how he missed his family. By the time the war was over, he could pay off his debt. Maybe by then his brothers' grief and fury would dim enough to allow forgiveness.

At least God had forgiven him. *Thank you, Lord. Your forgiveness is all I need, but you know it isn't all I want.*

The Westminster chimes played, and Wyatt ambled over to the row of stone pillars, each pierced in the side with rusty holes. London's wrought-iron fences had been melted down for the war effort, and bomb craters and boarded-up windows added further testimony to the reality of the war.

For over four years, Hitler's Germany had bullied Europe, conquering and bombing and killing. But now thousands of Americans were flooding into Britain with tons of ships, planes, and weapons. The Allies were fixing to make things right, and Wyatt was supposed to play a part.

Long and low, Big Ben announced the hour, each strike resounding in Wyatt's soul with the enormity of the moment.

For the sake of freedom, Wyatt Paxton couldn't afford to be a failure again.