



SUNRISE *at* NORMANDY

TWO

The
SKY ABOVE US

SARAH
SUNDIN



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© 2019 by Sarah Sundin

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Supreme Headquarters, Allied
Expeditionary Force

6 June 1944

Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.

But this is the year 1944! . . . Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. . . . The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory! . . .

Good luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower



1

OFF SAN FRANCISCO BAY, CALIFORNIA
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 2, 1943

Wars weren't won with caution, and aces weren't made in straight and level flight.

Lt. Adler Paxton tipped his P-39 Airacobra to the right and peeled away from the poky formation.

"Paxton? Where're you going? We're not in position."

Adler ignored Lt. Stan Mulroney's voice in his headphones and thrust the stick forward.

Five hundred feet below, Lt. Luis Camacho's flight of four P-39s grazed the top of the fog bank moseying toward the Golden Gate Bridge. By the time Mulroney found a position he liked, Cam would spot him and dive away into the fog.

Adler wouldn't wait that long. He lined up his tail with the afternoon sun, the engine thrumming in its strange position behind his seat. Most of the pilots in the 357th Fighter Group didn't like the Airacobra, but Adler had taken to it. They had an understanding.

The fighter plane screeched down to its prey at one o'clock below. Adler pulled out of his dive and aimed his nose just forward of Cam's nose. If he'd had any bullets, Cam would've flown right into them. Maybe the wreckage of his plane would've hurtled out

of control and taken out another Airacobra or two like bowling pins. A pilot could dream.

He spoke into the radio. “Howdy, Cammie. Got you. Perfect deflection shot.”

“What?” The wings waggled below. “Paxton? Where’d you come from?”

“Out of the sun and into your nightmares.” Mama would scold him for cockiness, but it was part of the game. Besides, he’d never see Mama again.

He tightened his chest muscles against the pain, then sent Cam a salute and wheeled away.

Good-natured curses peppered the radio waves, but Camacho would pull the same move on Adler, given half a chance.

Alone again in the sky, Adler got his bearings and headed for base. The twin orange towers of the Golden Gate Bridge tempted him as always.

He’d beaten the fog, and the air and waters were calm for once, so he succumbed.

“Come on, darlin’. This may be our last time.” In a few days the 357th was transferring to bases in the Midwest, and soon they’d head overseas. Into combat. Finally Adler could do some good.

He eased the plane into a shallow turning dive, aiming for the center of the bridge between the towers.

Down he went to seventy-five feet, his prop wash whitening the wave tops. Plenty of clearance, but the folks on the bridge wouldn’t know that. He shot a glance to the pedestrians pointing and gawking, and he chuckled. Folks needed entertainment with the war on.

The girders rushed by over his clear canopy. He whooped, pulled back the stick, swung over Alcatraz, and did a neat roll over Treasure Island and the Bay Bridge.

Nice day for flying. Strange thing about the San Francisco Bay—autumn was warmer and clearer than summer.

Even though Adler had spent the better part of two years in

California, he still hadn't gotten used to the hills in summer, toasted to tan. Not like the green of the Texas Hill Country.

A cheek muscle twitched. Nothing there for him anymore anyway.

Adler contacted the control tower at the Hayward Army Airfield and made a smooth landing. After he and the crew chief finished the postflight check, Adler pulled off his flight helmet and life vest, slung his parachute pack over his shoulder, and strolled toward the equipment shed.

Major Morty Shapiro, the squadron commander, ambled toward him, tall and lean and angular. "Good flight? Heard you bounced Cam."

"Sure as shooting."

"Mulroney's not happy with you."

"Neither's Camacho." Adler sent him half a smile.

Shapiro didn't send even a quarter back.

"All right." Adler dipped his head to the side. "But I saw an opportunity and took it. Got in a great deflection shot."

"Your specialty." Shapiro's eyes narrowed. "Pull a muscle?"

"Hmm?"

Shapiro pointed to Adler's chest.

He paused, his right hand caressing his left breast pocket as if he'd indeed pulled a muscle. Yes, the scrap remained pinned inside, the fabric that had torn from his fiancée's dress when she'd fallen to her death.

Adler rolled his left shoulder. "Reckon I shouldn't have done those extra forty push-ups in calisthenics this morning."

Shapiro glanced behind him toward two men in dress uniform crossing the field. "There he is. Paxton, I want you to meet our newest pilot."

"Want me to show him the ropes?"

Shapiro's gaze slid back to Adler. "Actually, he's an ace. Nick Westin. He flew a tour in the Pacific."

The competition, then. Adler studied the two men. Westin was a big man, his chin high, a swagger to his step, a plume of cigarette smoke trailing behind him.

Adler had no intention of coming in second again, not that being first would be easy with all the hotshot pilots in the 357th. “Who’s the other fellow?”

“New staff officer. Fenelli’s the name.”

Little guy, clipped step, soft about the face. The squadron needed pencil pushers to keep the planes in the air, and Adler would greet him as warmly as the ace.

“Capt. Nick Westin, I’d like you to meet Lt. Adler Paxton.”

The little guy stuck out his hand.

Adler blinked, recovered, and returned the handshake. “Nice to meet you.”

The man must have stood on tiptoes to meet the five-foot-four minimum height for fighter pilots, just as Adler had slouched to meet the six-foot maximum.

Westin’s smile was soft too, but his handshake was good and firm. “Adler? That’s an interesting name.”

“Means *eagle*.” Not only was it true, but it was easier than saying it was his mother’s maiden name, given to appease her parents when she died birthing her second son.

Westin’s dark eyes crinkled around the edges. “Born to fly, huh?”
“Sure was.”

“Good trait in a wingman.”

Wingman? Adler’s heart stilled. But jostling for position was part of the game.

Wasn’t it?

It wasn’t. Shapiro nodded. “You’ll be Westin’s wingman. Figured he’d be the right man to teach you to work as a team.”

A punch to the gut. Wingmen didn’t make ace. They were side-kicks. Second class. Never first.

Adler threw on a smile. Nothing to be gained from pouting, and

he could learn a few tricks from the veteran. “Looking forward to it. The major says you made a name for yourself in the Pacific. Reckon you have some stories.”

“Sure do.”

After Shapiro introduced Fenelli, the big, swaggering desk jockey, Adler excused himself to return his flight gear to the equipment shed.

Westin fell in beside him. “Where are you from? Down South?”

“Texas. And you?” The man’s accent pegged him as a Yankee.

“Indiana. Prettiest land you’ve ever seen.” Westin waxed on about the farms and the small town where his family ran a feedlot. Three sisters, two brothers, the prettiest wife, and the prettiest baby girl.

Fighter pilots loved to talk, and Adler loved to encourage them. He’d tell flying stories of his own to entertain, then toss out questions before things got personal.

“How about you?” Westin snugged his cap farther down over his dark hair. “Come from a big family too?”

Out of the sun and into his nightmares. He hadn’t talked about his family in over two years, and he wasn’t about to start now. Tell people he’d tried to kill his older brother Wyatt for accidentally causing Oralee’s death? Tell people his younger brother Clay had tried to kill Adler later that same night? Not in a million years.

Instead he raised a rueful smile and snatched his set answer from the shelf. “Not all families are happy.”

Westin’s eyelids rose, then settled low in compassion. “So what do you think of the P-39? I flew the P-40 out of New Guinea. Got any pointers? Heard she’s dangerous in a stall.”

Adler liked the man already. “She can be. We’ve lost four pilots in stalls. You’ve got to keep a cool head.”

Yes, the deflection shot was Adler’s specialty.



THE SKY ABOVE US

NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 1943

This wasn't how Violet Lindstrom had dreamed of sailing overseas.

On the pier in New York Harbor, Violet tried not to lose sight of her fellow Red Cross workers among the thousands of soldiers, but her eyes were drawn to the HMT *Queen Elizabeth*.

Designed to be the most luxurious ocean liner in the world, she had never fulfilled her purpose. Instead, she'd been painted a dull gray and outfitted to pack in over twelve thousand troops.

Violet sighed, her unfulfilled longing echoing that of the great ship.

"Are you all right, Violet?"

She smiled down at her new friend, Kitty Kelly. "I couldn't be happier."

"Liar." Kitty winked a pretty brown eye. "I know homesickness when I see it."

Violet tightened her grip on her suitcase. How could she already be homesick? She who dreamed of being a missionary in Africa?

Kitty's teasing gaze wouldn't let up.

So Violet chuckled. "I'll be fine when we get to work in England."

"I can't wait to find out where the Red Cross assigns us."

"Me too." Violet latched on to her friend's eagerness. With her teaching experience, surely she'd be assigned to work with refugee children or orphans. What a lovely way to serve the Lord.

Winnie Nolan glanced back at Violet and Kitty. "I'm hoping for an Aeroclub. Sure wouldn't mind meeting a bunch of dashing pilots." She nodded toward a dozen men in olive drab overcoats and the misshapen "crush caps" favored by airmen.

"I'd rather work at one of the service clubs." Jo Radley adjusted her steel helmet. "Can you imagine living in London? How thrilling."

Violet refrained from wrinkling her nose. Entertaining the able-bodied wasn't serving.

"Lookie here." One of the flyboys, a dark-haired man in need

of a shave, worked his way through the crowd. “The Red Cross is here to see us off. Where are the donuts, girls?”

“On the other side of the Atlantic,” Jo said with a wink.

“How about a kiss instead?”

“You’re more likely to get a donut, pal.” Kitty spread an empty hand and a saucy smile. “And as you can see—no donuts.”

His buddies crowded around, and Violet eased back, glad girls like Kitty could banter.

The pilot slapped a hand over his chest. “Aw, have a heart. We’re going to war. We might not come home.”

Kitty gave Violet a nudge and a mock pout. “Wouldn’t that be a shame?”

“Come on. A fellow needs something to remember the good old US of A.” His gaze drifted up to Violet. “Say, I’ve never kissed an Amazon.”

And he never would. She ignored the sting of the familiar barb and opened her mouth to tell him . . . something.

He grabbed her head, yanked her down, and slammed a kiss onto her mouth. Wet, warm, awful.

She pushed against his chest, but he wouldn’t budge. Masculine laughter and feminine protests filled her ears, and everything inside her recoiled. Where was the Red Cross chaperone when she needed him?

Someone wrenched the man away. “What on earth are you doing, Riggs?”

Violet hunched over and wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve.

“Just getting a good-bye kiss.”

“Not by force, you numbskull.” Her rescuer had a Texas drawl. “Whatever made you think a pretty girl like her would want to kiss your ugly mug?”

Violet kept scrubbing at her mouth as if she could scrub away the humiliation.

“Here, sweetie.” Kitty handed her a handkerchief. “You’ll ruin your coat.”

Oh no. Red lipstick smeared the sleeve of her charcoal gray Red Cross topcoat. How would she get it out?

“Listen up, boys.” The Texan had to be their commanding officer. “These ladies are going overseas too. They’re serving their country. Y’all will treat them with respect, first as ladies and second for wearing a uniform. Is that clear?”

The men grumbled their agreement.

“Apologize to her, Riggs.”

Violet kept her head bent, the handkerchief over her mouth, her eyes scrunched shut.

“Sorry, miss.”

“Apology accepted,” she mumbled.

“Now, y’all get along,” the Texan said.

Footsteps shuffled away.

“They’re gone now.” Kitty massaged Violet’s lower back.

“Are you all right, miss?” A big hand rested on her shoulder. The Texan? Hadn’t he left with the others?

Violet dragged her gaze from his brown oxfords up his olive drab overcoat to sky blue eyes right at her level. “I—I’m fine.”

A smile twitched on his handsome face. “You will be. Any woman strong enough to meet Red Cross standards can handle one unwelcome kiss.”

She tried to return his smile. “Thank you, sir. I appreciate your help.”

“Anytime, miss. They give you any more trouble, send for me.”

It would be handy to know a high-ranking officer. “Your name, sir?”

He swept off his cap and bowed his head, revealing sunny blond hair. “Lt. Adler Paxton, at your service.”

A lieutenant? Yes, only one silver bar on the shoulder straps of

his overcoat. He held the same rank as the others. Why had they listened to him? “You must be a married man.”

His head jerked up. “Why—why would you say that?”

She held herself straighter, her dignity returning. “I’ve found married men are more chivalrous. Your wife is blessed.”

“I’m not . . .” His eyelids sagged, clouding the blue. “Was engaged once.”

Was? Her mouth drifted open, full of questions.

Then he flashed a grin. “Pleasure meeting you, miss.” And he was gone.

Gone before she could tell him her name.

And she wanted to tell him, wanted to tell him she’d been engaged once too.

“Well, he’s a looker,” Kitty said.

Yes, he was. More importantly, he was a gentleman, like the cowboy heroes in her favorite movies.

“Remember the Red Cross guidelines,” Jo said in a singsong. “We’re here to offer mercy, a listening ear, and wholesome fun.”

Winnie laughed. “If Violet wants to offer it to a handsome pilot, so be it.”

“Not on your life, girls.” Violet put on a playful smile and held up Kitty’s soiled hankie. “I’ve had enough of flyboys to last a lifetime.”

They all laughed.

And yet, Violet searched the sea of olive drab for the tall man with the intriguing blend of chivalry and mystery.

Something told her Adler Paxton needed that listening ear.