

When a young socialite falls in love with her WWI army driving instructor, they face the tragic French battlefields.

Elodie

By Sarah Bates

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Can her love survive WWI?



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San Diego's December weather felt wrong to Elodie. Her shift had begun at six in the morning. Where was the cold, dense fog? She thought about her brother still asleep at home, and Mother waiting on him. With an increase in the number of families visiting recovering troops, school orchestras and small jazz bands playing patriotic and Christmas music enlivened Balboa Park. Worries over Spanish Flu contagion had diminished. For those whose lives it touched, however, nothing would be the same again.

Twelve hours later, she dropped off her ambulance at the Motor Pool, after unloading two injured men at the War Dispensary. A conversation with the men had been futile. One was heavily sedated and the other man merely groaned.

Walking off some of the gloom through Balboa Park seemed like a good idea. If she hurried, she'd get back to her tent before mess.

Elodie headed toward Balboa Stadium, oblivious to the laughing passersby, blurs of khaki and Navy blues on their way to mess, or back to their tents. She thought about her home, and the family customs she had missed this fall. The memories blotted out the images of pain on the faces of the men she transported. Her family's big Thanksgiving dinner at home with Anthony, his friends, and even that waiter her mother invited. Everything had gone on without her.

By now, Tilly would be stacking Christmas decorations onto the screened back porch. It would be cold enough for the blazing fire Mother kept going all winter. But, would the holidays be at all the same, she wondered? She couldn't go home. A foursome of laughing sailors wearing blue pea coats, and pretty girls bundled up in bright wool jackets, brushed by, leaving a cloud of Coty perfume in their wake. The girls' shoes echoed as they walked away. When was the last time she wore scent or beautiful shoes? Taking care of her daily hygiene took minutes, and eroded her sleep. *Thank goodness for the Quartermaster's Laundry Service*, she thought. A fresh uniform, shirtwaist, and stockings without holes had become a blessing she hadn't expected.

A flapping poster pinned to a pole under a lamp caught her attention. Elodie stopped to read it aloud. "Big Dance Saturday. Plaza de Panama. Seven to ten." She admired the drawings of a vocalist and a trumpet player, and romantic sketches of couples dancing cheek-to-cheek made her sigh. Would Captain Doyle and Major Bosworth really be there? Imagining the Red Cross matron Tango dancing made her smile.

Another group of sailors passed by. One of them whistled. Another man yelled, "Hey, good lookin'." She waved, then turned back to the poster. Who would have thought dancing outdoors in Southern California year-round could be pleasant? In San Francisco, by now, the fog would have given way to brisk winter nights. Was a dance too soon? Had the Spanish Flu really waned that much? People were still getting sick,

including three more of the Corps members. The poster flapped against its pins again. See me, see me, it beckoned.

On an adjacent light pole, a patriotic poster advertised a Liberty War bond sale. Lend as they fight, Buy War Bonds! The poster's red, white, and blue colors were everywhere. She hoped her father heeded the financial pitch, and made the family proud.

Elodie shivered as a chilly evening breeze wrapped around her. She tightened the soft, blue, wool muffler her mother had knitted for her, and then stuffed her hands in her pockets. She felt so alone.

She was still staring at the poster when she was startled by a familiar male voice. "Thinking about attending?"

Elodie recognized the scent of Bay Rum, and looked over her shoulder. She felt a blush brighten her cheeks, and turned away, embarrassed, but then turned back. "Why hello, Sergeant Wight!" she said. "Are you thinking of going?"

The sergeant moved closer to gaze at the poster, his arms crossed. "I don't dance very well."

"I could teach you," she teased, looking straight into his eyes. He looked away, and smiled. A fan of tiny lines folded at the corners of his eyes.

"I'm an excellent dancer," Elodie boasted.

He laughed. "Old dogs...and all that," he said. Wight pulled off his uniform hat and sandy brown hair fell across his forehead. The hat concealed glints of silver in his clipped sideburns. He was an attractive man, not just a soldier, and his tailored uniform always appeared freshly ironed.

Elodie tilted her head. "Old dogs can learn from the right trainer."

"Is that a dare, Private Austin?" Wight stepped closer, tipped his hat in place, and adjusted the brim to eye level.

Elodie looked up at him again, and felt his body heat radiating. "It is if you say so, Sergeant Wight. And, it's Corporal Austin now, Sergeant."

The sergeant grinned, and touched the brim of his hat. "See you then."

"Wear your dancing shoes," Elodie called out, before retracing her steps toward her billet.

Dusk had faded into a blue-black night, with the glimmering lights in the park giving reasons for people to linger. But, despite Southern California's mild December weather, Elodie was cold and hungry now but she was surprised that her gloomy mood had lifted. She had just turned onto Russ Street when a motorcycle pulled ahead. "Not Wilcox again."

"Lieutenant Wilcox, please leave me alone," she shouted, averting her eyes from the man standing in the shadows beside the vehicle. Angry now, and tired, she wondered if she would have to go to Wilcox's commander to get him out of her life. The man pulled off his goggles, and stepped into the light. His mask dangled from his neck.

"Who's Wilcox?" he asked.

"Oh! Sergeant Wight. I thought you were someone else."

"Obviously."

"I am so sorry," Elodie said. How foolish she felt. She blurted, "Wilcox is an annoying person who seems to turn up at the oddest times." *Why am I telling him this?* She thought.

"Like me?"

"No. In fact, I've been wondering what happened to *you*." Elodie placed a hand on her heart. "And, just moments ago, there you were, standing beside me, having a lovely conversation."

Wight looked puzzled. “Why were you looking for me?” he asked. “You didn't mention it before.”

Elodie had almost forgotten. “I needed to learn how to drive and repair a new ambulance. You see, I was promoted to Corporal for some silly act and my reward—including the promotion to Corporal—was being elevated to ambulance duty exclusively.”

“Did you learn what you needed?” he asked.

“I did but I still wished the instructor had been you.”

She smiled but felt so embarrassed that she grabbed the first new thought. “But, why are you here right now? We just spoke.”

Wight laughed. “I came back to see if you'd like to grab a bite to eat.”

“Right now, or before our dancing lesson?” Elodie asked. “Surely not now.” A dirty mask also hung from her neck and her uniform reeked of dried blood, and the rank odor of bandaged wounds. “I'd like to wash up,” she said.

“Now. And, I'm not so presentable either. I don't know if I can dance. I do know I can drive a motorcycle.”

Elodie stammered, “I...I have to be back by Taps.”

“It's seven o'clock. That leaves us three hours for the best cioppino around. You game?”

“Better than San Francisco?” Elodie asked.

“You bet. My favorite Italian diner is right down at the docks.”

“And, we're getting there on your motorcycle?”

“Yep, right on the seat behind me. Since we're going to be so close, please call me by my given name,” the sergeant said.

“I don't know your given name.” Once again, Elodie felt foolish and unprepared for this surprising turn of events.

“Archer. My mother, brothers, and my friends call me Arch. You can, too.”

Elodie smiled, and felt a surge of happiness for the first time in a long time. “Okay, Arch,” she said, sliding onto the tiny motorcycle seat.

“Keep your feet up, and hold on,” he said, taking off.

Elodie slipped her arms around his chest, and rested her cheek against his warm back. His uniform held that whisper of Bay Rum shaving tonic she had grown to love.

Arch seemed to know everyone in the small family-run café, which appeared to teeter on the end of a shabby wooden dock. A little red, white, and green flag alongside a sizeable American flag fluttered by the doorway. Blazing white electric lights outlined the entrance.

Two smiling people, busily plating pasta bowls, and filling baskets with fresh, hot bread, looked up when the bell rang over the doorway.

“Ciao, Sergeant Arch. *Come stai?*” said the white-haired man with an apron wrapped around his waist.

Arch grinned. “Doing fine, Angelo. *Tutto bene*. Thanks for asking. Something smells really good in here.”

He turned to Elodie. “Angelo and Maria Russo are the owners. I come here often.” Mrs. Russo stretched up to kiss Arch on the cheek, and then giggled.

“This is Elodie, my friend,” Arch said.

Angelo rolled his eyes when Arch blushed. “Your ‘friend,’ Sergeant Arch? Tsk, tsk.”

Arch threw his arms up. “Okay, more than a friend. Two bowls of cioppino *per favore*.”

A half-hour later, Elodie was wiping delicious tomato sauce off her chin when a deep male voice said, “Hello, Miss Austin.”

She hadn't looked up when the tall waiter placed steaming bowls of cioppino in front of them. Arch had torn off a hunk of warm bread, dipped it in the savory sauce, and offered it to her. She was so hungry she ate it like she'd never seen food before.

Elodie looked up into a dark-eyed, smiling face.

“Carmine? What a surprise!”

“How do you know Angelo's son, Elodie?” asked Arch.

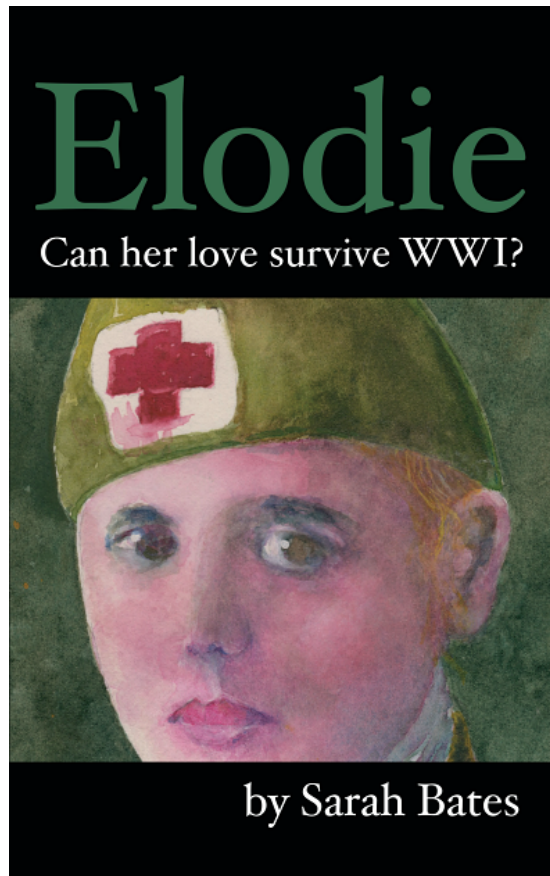
“She knows me from the hotel, sir. Her family was my responsibility.”

“Ah. I see. So, who are you really, Elodie Austin?”

“Never mind, Sergeant Wight. You know all there is to know.” She grinned, then looked at her watch, and stopped smiling. “Oh, my gosh, I have to leave.”

When Elodie realized how late it was, she said, “You might not get in trouble but I will if I'm not back in my tent at ten o'clock.”

Arch threw some money on the table, picked Elodie up, excited and breathless, carried her out of the cafe, and gently dropped her onto the motorcycle seat. They waved to Carmine and his parents and then, a moment later, leaving the waterfront behind, they roared back, turned onto Russ, and Elodie jumped off with five minutes to spare. She waved, and then ran into the cluster of Corps tents.



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