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*On Wings of Fire*

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To Nancy and Mimi

*On Wings of Fire*

## Chapter 1

*T*he drought of summer covered the Atlanta landscape with a thick red Georgia dust. No portion of the city was exempt from its blanket, not even the allée of dogwood trees that paralleled the drive of the Italianate villa on West Paces Ferry Road.

A forlorn Alpharetta Beaumont, standing at an upstairs window, looked down at the straight row of trees as she waited for the taxi. Like an exile leaving her beloved land behind, Alpharetta committed the sight to memory. Her eyes swept beyond the trees to the azaleas that had already formed next year's buds with their promise of delicate pinks and lavenders. But the harsh red shroud of dust covered them also.

Why couldn't it have been brilliant April instead of July—the ugliest part of the year, when the bleached blades of grass begged for rain like flowers in the desert.

A yellow taxi turned into the long drive. Alpharetta, seeing it, left the window, put on her straw sailor hat, and began to walk down the stairs with the suitcase in her hands. No one was in the house to stop her, not even Min-yo, the houseboy. She'd seen to that. Now there remained only one more thing to do before walking out the front door.

She took the two letters from her handbag and placed them on the Louis XV table in the hallway. The first was addressed to her guardians, Reed and Anna Clare St. John, and the second to Ben Mark, her fiancé. With an unsteady hand, she removed the diamond engagement ring and, as the doorbell chimed the driver's impatience, she dropped it into the envelope, which she hurriedly sealed. Without looking back, she rushed to open the door, lest she change her mind.

The long mirror in the hall recorded, for a brief moment, the slender young woman with her flaming red hair partially hidden under the straw hat and her exotic green eyes luminous with unshed tears. Then that image was gone as she opened the door.

"You called a taxi, Ma'am?"

"Yes. If you'll just take my bag . . ."

She followed the driver down the steps and waited for him to open the taxi door for her. "Where to, ma'am?" he asked, while he slid under the wheel.

"Brookwood Station," she replied, the muscles in her throat constricting.

"A mighty hot day to be travelin'," the driver commented, turning his head slightly to wait for her verification before he started down the drive.

"Yes. A hot day."

"Just about the hottest day of the summer, so far," he added.

With a fleeting smile on her lips, Alpharetta responded, "Do you know what the temperature is?"

"Already a hundred 'n' one by the thermometer at the cab stand. I expect it might even get up to a hundred 'n' three by late afternoon."

Mercifully, the traffic drew the driver's attention and Alpharetta, having made the responses that courtesy demanded, settled down on the seat and rode the rest of the way in silence. She was determined not to think of the past week. She would have ample time for that later. Her main concern now was that the train not be delayed. If Ben Mark should discover the letter and follow her to the station before the train pulled out, she was lost. The excuse she had given for breaking off their engagement was a flimsy one that wouldn't bear up under a challenge, but the true reason was too painful to divulge to anyone.

Alpharetta had been gone less than twenty minutes when Min-yo, the Chinese servant, returned with the week's groceries. As he

walked through the side entrance, a sense of desolation momentarily touched his bones and caused him to shiver, as if a good *shen* had been suddenly replaced by *kwei*, or ghosts in the house. But then, as he hurried on toward the kitchen and began to remove the groceries from the brown sacks, the pleasure from his successful shopping soon made him forget about his initial foreboding.

Min-yo smiled as he placed the three small steaks in the refrigerator at the far end of the kitchen. It had taken his own shoe stamp and a bag of rice to convince his brother, who ran a laundry downtown, to part with the meat stamp. Because of his swap, the St. Johns could have a hung shao beef that night, instead of macaroni and cheese. As Min-yo continued to plan the evening meal, he heard the screen door to the side entrance open.

"Hello! Anybody home?"

Min-yo, recognizing Ben Mark's voice, left the kitchen. "God afternoon, Lieutenant," Min-yo said, seeing the tall man with hair as black as his own pigtail. Only Ben Mark's hair was cropped close to his head in military fashion.

"Is my fiancée home?" Ben Mark asked, seeming to get a special pleasure from the sound of the word.

"I go see. You like to wait in living room?" Min-yo asked politely.

Ben Mark strolled down the hall as Min-yo hurried up the winding stairs toward the suite of

rooms that Alpharetta had occupied ever since Nurse Jenson had been dismissed. He smiled as he walked by the door of the bedroom where the young Alpharetta had spent her first night in the house. He remembered it well. Eight years ago. The shabby old valise that contained her one good dress . . . her desire not to be any trouble.

The door to the suite was wide open. Min-yo knocked on the panel and called out, "Missee, your lieutenant is downstairs." He waited a moment, and when there was no answer he called out again, "Missee."

"Min-yo." The voice from the downstairs hall was deep, masculine, urgent. The houseboy retraced his steps down the stairs.

Ben Mark St. John stood by the hall table and in his hands he held an opened letter.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" Min-yo inquired, not alarmed at first by the sight of the letter. Alpharetta often left notes propped by the gold ormolu clock on the table, especially when she was going to be late for supper.

"Alpharetta has gone." As spoken by Ben Mark, the statement seemed far more serious than the situation warranted.

"She be back," Min-yo assured him.

Ben Mark then opened his hand to reveal the ring. "No, Min-yo. Not unless I can find her in time. She's broken our engagement."

"But why, Lieutenant? I already saved eggs for wedding cake."

Ben Mark, visibly upset, asked, "When was the last time you saw her?"

"About hour ago – before I went to market."

"And my uncle? Where is he?"

"At farm. Miss Anna Clare, too."

With Min-Yo trailing him, Ben Mark left the entrance hall and walked into the back hall where the telephone hung. He gave a number to the operator and, as it rang, he waited impatiently for someone to answer.

"No one seems to be there," the operator advised.

"Just let it keep ringing, operator," Ben Mark requested.

And so the ringing began again. Finally the scowl lifted from Ben Mark's face as a voice came over the wires.

"Al, here."

"Al, this is Ben Mark St. John."

"How're you, Lieutenant? I heard you were –"

"I'm trying to find Alpharetta," Ben Mark interrupted. "Has she called you about taking the Piper Cub out today?"

"No, sir. It's still in the hangar. You want me to get it ready?"

Ben Mark hesitated. There was no way he could keep it secret. The news would be out soon enough. "No, Al. If she comes, find some excuse not to let her fly it. And Al, could you

make sure she doesn't hitch a ride with anyone else?"

"No danger in that. The only other plane in the hangar has been taken apart. I'm working on the engine right now." After debating with himself, Al finally blurted out, "You two have a lovers' quarrel or something?"

"Something like that, Al. And I've got to keep her from leaving town until I get a chance to talk with her."

"Then, I'll walk on over to the hut and check the next commercial flight. If I see her, I'll have her call you for sure, Lieutenant – if it's the last thing I do."

"Thanks, Al."

Ben Mark hung up the phone and turned to the Chinese houseboy who had been standing beside him and unabashedly listening to the conversation. "Come on, Min-yo. You'll have to ride with me."

"Where we go to find her?"

"To Brookwood Station on Peachtree. And if she isn't there, we'll drive to the main railroad terminal."

Ben Mark put the engagement ring in his pocket, and with Min-yo hurrying to keep pace, he walked down the hall and out the side door to the Jaguar parked near the curved marble steps.

As he backed his car around and headed out, another car turned into the driveway, blocking

his path. Long, flowing red hair was visible in the open convertible.

“Alpharetta!” Ben Mark’s relief was evident in his voice. But even as Ben Mark stopped the car and got out, Min-yo knew it was Belline Wexford. He was too far away to see her eyes—turquoise, instead of green—the only exterior characteristic different from Alpharetta. But he had always been able to tell the two women apart, for Alpharetta radiated *husn*, an inner beauty, even from a distance.

The disappointment showed in Ben Mark’s face as he realized his mistake. “What are you doing in Alpharetta’s car?” he demanded.

“What’s the matter, cousin? You don’t seem very glad to see me.”

“I was hoping you were Alpharetta, coming back home..”

Belline disguised her jealous twinge at the mention of the other woman’s name. “Isn’t she here? I was just returning her car. I had a blowout this morning.”

“No, she isn’t here. She’s left for good.”

Belline laughed. “Why, whatever did you do to her, Ben Mark, this close to your wedding day?”

“Oh, shut up, Belline. Just get the convertible out of the way. Min-yo and I have to get to the rail station to try to stop her.” Then thinking of the small amount of fuel in his own car, he

suddenly asked, “How much gas did you leave in?”

“About half a tank.”

“Then, move over. We’ll go in the convertible, instead.”

Ben Mark motioned for Min-yo to switch cars, while he slid into the driver’s seat. As soon as the Chinese houseboy had climbed into the rear seat, Ben Mark, with Belline at his side, backed the second car onto West Paces Ferry Road and started toward Peachtree.

At Brookwood Station, Alpharetta sat on a hard wooden bench and waited for the train. Once before she’d tried to sever her ties with the St. John family, when Anna Clare’s nurse had persuaded her that she was no longer welcome in their home. That decision had also brought her to this same passenger station on Peachtree Road. But Reed had arrived in time to stop her. Today, she didn’t want to leave Atlanta any more than she’d wanted to on that day long ago. But within a matter of weeks, she had been forced into it, to spare the St. Johns embarrassment.

Perhaps when the war was over—perhaps when circumstances were different, she could tell Ben Mark she loved him, would always love him. And perhaps she would be able to come to terms with her real mother.

The word *mother* had an alien sound to Alpharetta. She felt so much closer to her distant cousin, Anna Clare, than to the strange woman who'd suddenly appeared on her doorstep, claiming kinship and demanding money. How ironic that her engagement announcement to Ben Mark St. John would be seen by the mother who had deserted her when she was a baby. She hadn't even known she was alive until that Saturday in May.

Alpharetta knew she would never forget that day, as long as she lived. It had started out so gloriously. She and Ben Mark had been flying for most of the afternoon. She remembered the color of the sky with its rolling white clouds, the sun catching the glitter of rocks jutting from the Chattahoochee River. Following the water's meandering path, they flew low, tipping the Piper's wings to acknowledge the waves and hurrahs of the people floating lazily downriver in their inner tubes, silver canoes, and brightly colored rafts. She was almost afraid that day, she was so happy---with her fiancé home on his weekend pass, with their marriage only two months away, as soon as Ben Mark graduated from flight school. Even the guilty feeling from using the rationed gasoline was forgotten when she saw the pleasure registered on Ben Mark's face.

By six o'clock that same evening, her happiness was shattered, and in its place lodged

a wariness that refused to go away. And with good reason. For the confrontation with her mother settled nothing. Though she had given her most of her savings, the woman had returned the next week to demand more money. It was then Alpharetta realized what she must do, however painful. Ben Mark's pride was at stake and she could not ask him to accept such a woman as part of his family. He deserved better than that.

It was hard enough for him to accept the fact that her father and brothers had once been arrested for making moonshine. But when her father died, and Reed loaned Conyer and Duluth, her two brothers, enough money for a down payment on the cattle ranch in Nevada, Ben Mark relaxed. Of course, it had helped, too, when Reed began to treat her as a treasured daughter, instead of Anna Clare's poor, distant relative. But with her mother's appearance, all that would change.

Alpharetta stared down at her unadorned finger, with its telltale circle of white where the ring had resided until an hour before. Quickly, with a feeling of loss, she covered her left hand with her right and stared at the clock on the wall. In a few minutes, the train should be pulling out of the main terminal. When it stopped briefly to take on passengers at Brookwood Station, there would be no

possibility of turning back. By morning, she would be in Washington.

"Excuse me, miss. Is this seat taken?"

Alpharetta looked up at a woman with two small children. She shook her head and moved over to make room for them on the bench.

"We're goin' to Chattanooga," the tow-headed little boy volunteered as he squeezed his small frame into the space between Alpharetta and his mother, who held a sleeping baby. "To meet my pa. He's got a new job at a shipyard in Norfolk. And we're movin' with him."

"Ennis Thompson, I've already warned you about botherin' other people. You just sit still and finish your Orange Crush."

The woman's sharp voice woke the baby in her arms. The infant began to cry and the mother, looking toward her son, commanded, "Get Sister's bottle from the duffel, Ennis."

Hurrying to obey his mother, Ennis leaned over. In the process, he spilled his beverage on the bench and it splashed onto Alpharetta's yellow dress. She stood up quickly and began to mop the stain with her handkerchief.

"Ennis Thompson," the mother began again to the accompanying shriek of the baby.

Seeing the sorrowful look on the little boy's face, Alpharetta said, "That's all right. No harm's done."

"Maybe you'd better sponge it off right away," the woman suggested, "with water."

"Yes, I'll do that." Alpharetta replied and fled toward the restroom. Once inside, she fought to maintain her control as she began to clean the dress. But she burst into tears, the damage to her yellow dress of little consequence compared to her broken heart.

Just beyond the traffic light where Ben Mark stopped, rose the Palladian-style Southern Railway Peachtree Station, known more familiarly as Brookwood, its classical motif and red brick walls in Flemish bond proclaiming the genius of its architect while denying its utilitarian function as a suburban passenger depot.

Ben Mark waited for the light to change and then drove into the parking lot. "Belline and I will check inside," he said to Min-yo as the three climbed out of the car.

"Then I look on platform." Min-yo volunteered.

Belline matched Ben Mark's stride as they walked to the double doors of the building.

Once inside, Belline saw that the hot station was crowded with women, children, and crying babies—not a pleasant place with the odor of sweating bodies, the smell of milk gone sour, and the strong scent of disinfectant drifting over the transom from the restrooms all but overpowering. She turned up her nose. Before the war, few people used the station other than

those who lived on the smart north side of the city. Now, to Belline, the station was different—spoiled.

“Beline, check the restroom,” Ben Mark ordered as he looked up and down each bench.

“All right,” she said grudgingly. “But I can tell you now that Alpharetta wouldn’t be caught dead in there.”

Beline reached into her white summer purse and quickly pulled out a handkerchief before she touched the knob on the door to the public restroom. The door closed behind her, and she gingerly surveyed the empty room. Hanging on a wooden peg next to the washbasin was a straw sailor hat with yellow ribbons—exactly like the one—

Beline stopped, listened to the soft sobs coming from the enclosure. She hastily spun around and fled from the restroom.

“Well?”

She stared at Ben Mark. “I think we’re wasting our time,” Belline murmured.

He nodded. “She’s probably at the main terminal.”

“How about the bus station?”

“I hadn’t even thought of looking there,” Ben Mark confessed.

“If only we knew in which direction she was going. . .” Belline sympathized. On her way to the car, Belline wore a satisfied smile as she

deposited her handkerchief into the trash bin attached to the lamp post.

Later, after dropping Min-yo at the bus station, Ben Mark and Belline traveled toward Spring Street and the downtown rail terminal.

Many times the size of Brookwood on Peachtree Road, the main terminal had an altogether different ambience. Unlike the smaller station, it had a sense of urgency. At Brookwood, the only military uniform was a mock sailor suit worn by a six-year-old, but here clusters of khaki and sailor-white moved back and forth. Interspersed with civilians, the servicemen walked faster, talked faster, with surreptitious glances toward the clock running out of time for them.

Ben Mark, also aware of the clock, frantically searched the sea of faces for familiar red hair and endearing green eyes. While he stood and watched the boarding of the passenger trains, a wave of young women rushed past him. They all looked alike—brown-haired, solemn young women, with no distinguishing features to tell one from the other. When the last one had disappeared, a disappointed Ben Mark turned to Belline.

“She’s not here, either,” he said.

Two miles north, a tear-stained Alpharetta emerged from Brookwood Station and took her place on the platform. In five minutes, the train arrived; her luggage was hoisted to the baggage

compartment, and boarding a passenger car, Alpharetta Beaumont left Atlanta behind.

## Chapter 2

*I*n the rapidly plunging temperatures of early evening, Lieutenant Daniel "Marsh" Wexford, stepbrother to Belline, shifted the weight of his paratrooper equipment on his back as he stood with his friends, Gig and Laroche, under the wings of one of the C-47's waiting to take off from the Tunisian airfield.

The three men had come a long way since their basic training together at Fort Benning, as members of the 82nd Airborne Division. Although Marsh was now an officer, he still felt a special kinship with Gig and Laroche, who were as different from each other as night and day, not only in looks, but in personality, too. Laroche, small, dark, and taciturn, was the perfect foil for the taller, sandy-haired Gig, with