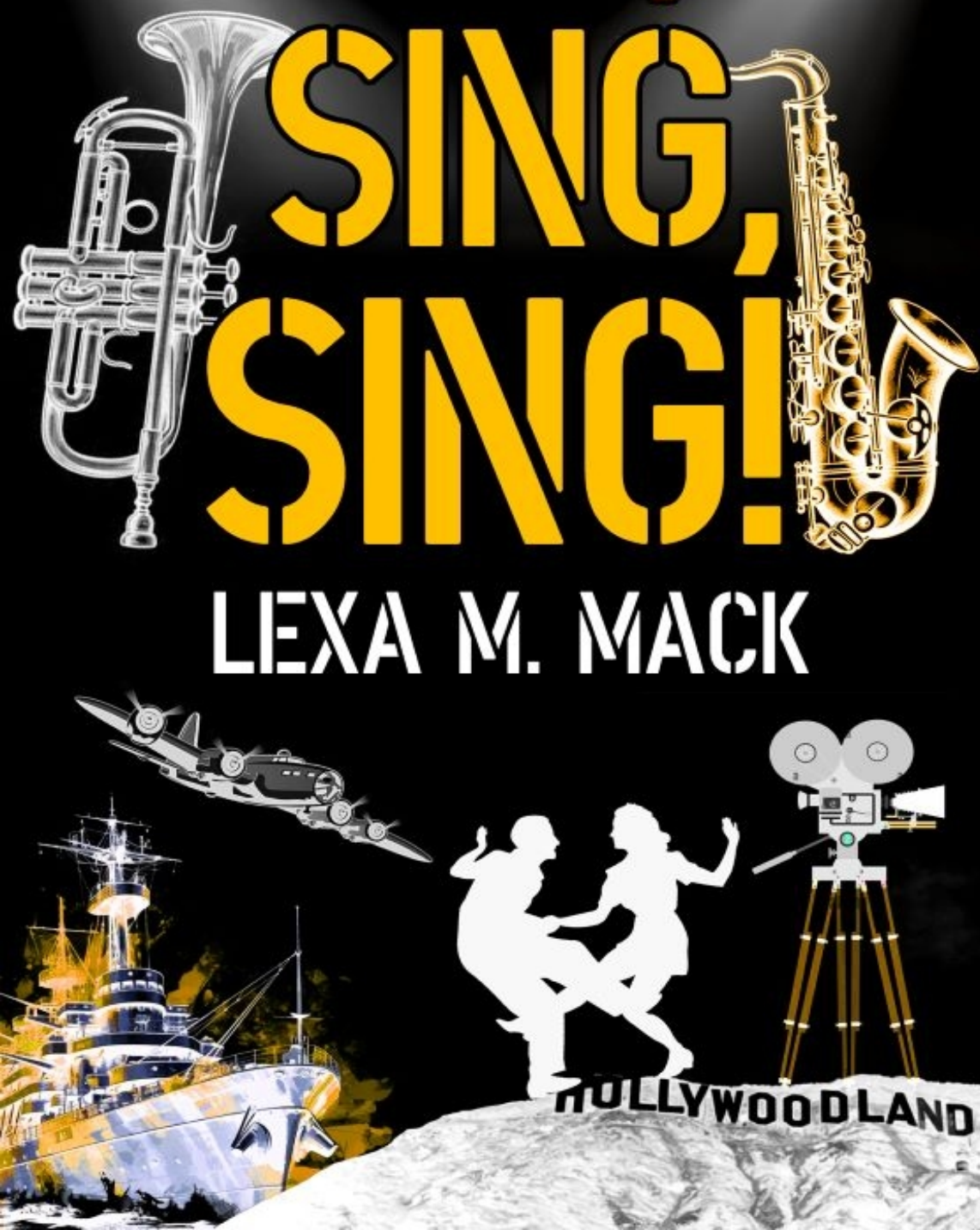


SING, SING, SING!

LEXA M. MACK



Sing, Sing, Sing!

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This book is dedicated to my mother. She rose from a long line of women who were fierce and determined survivors. I am grateful that the line continues.

PREFACE

Sing, Sing, Sing! was written by musician Louis Prima in 1935 and actually had words, although most of us have never heard them. It quickly became an instrumental, and in a 1938 Carnegie Hall performance, drummer Gene Krupa and the Benny Goodman Orchestra changed this anthem of the Jazz Age for all time.

That night, Krupa refused to quit playing at the end of the planned arrangement, and as he drove the tom-tom beat of the drums forward, various musicians stood up and took the spotlight, contributing their own solo to the twelve minute long extravaganza.

After that, whenever the band performed, the audience would demand that the closing musical piece be Sing, Sing, Sing! It became a living and changing expression of the era.

Use the QR code below to listen to this historical performance.



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CHAPTER ONE



April 1943

Wind blustered between the sturdy apartment buildings kicking up bits of paper and dust as Tilda dragged her suitcase down the steps of the front stoop. She'd hoped to purchase a less cumbersome bag, but the luggage manufacturers were now only making war supplies. The magazine ads even promised they'd be back after the war. For now, she'd had to settle for borrowing an unmatched set from her aunt.

Her father had pulled up directly in front of the building and her cosmetics case sat in the back seat of his cab. As he hefted the larger bag in and closed the trunk she turned to gaze up at the five-story apartment building. At Christmas most of the windows would have been strung with decorations, but now many of them boasted only white banners trimmed in red and carrying the blue stars that signified a family member in the military. The one in the window of her parents' apartment carried three blue stars for her two brothers and her brother-in-law. There were a few windows in the building adorned with the sad gold stars that signified the loss of a son, father, or sometimes a daughter.

"Well, that's it then. Are you ready?" Her father was not a patient man.

"Sure, Pop. I've got everything. Thanks so much for the ride."

"It's the least I could do."

"Yeah, but I had thought I might make the walk to Grand Central just to say good-bye to the city."

Her father snorted as he hefted his frame into the driver's seat. "I'd have liked to see you haul all this luggage down there on your own."

Tilda smiled. Her father wouldn't have understood how she could be happy to be going and yet so sad to be leaving.

She opened the cab door and slid into the front seat.

“Ain’t you gonna sit in the back like a real fare?”

“Not this time. I want to be right here next to you.”

She wanted to tell him to drive really slowly and take the long route so she could say goodbye to all her memories, but she didn’t think that would go over very well. It was a working day for him, and she knew that each eager, arm-waving potential customer they passed up would cause him pain.

Queens had been her home as long as she could remember, and she knew the route they would take by heart. First over the Queensboro Bridge where she’d be able to gaze out over the city, then a left at Central Park and the congested ride down Fifth Avenue to 42nd Street and Grand Central Station.

She gazed out the window at some of the sights that you would only see in New York City. Gone were the business-suited men selling apples on the street corners and the long bread lines of the Depression. Of course, those sights would not have been right on Fifth Avenue. The beginning of the war finally signaled the end of the long economic recovery after the Wall Street Crash. Today she spotted commuters on roller skates cruising down the sidewalks putting their own and the pedestrians’ lives in danger but saving gasoline. It looked like fun.

She loved the city: the grimy tenements, the soaring skyscrapers, the sludgy East and Hudson rivers. There was energy there that she knew she would never find any place else on the earth. She hoped she would be back, but for now she needed to venture out and figure out what was going on in the rest of the world.

New York City was the hardest city to live in, but the easiest to stay in. She had become confused by the difference between The City and the rest of the world. There was war everywhere. Cities were burning, but New York City chugged along like nothing else mattered: buildings going up, shows being produced, crowds ebbing and flowing through the streets. After the Depression, New York embraced the war. It signaled deliverance from sadness and gave everything new purpose. There were deals to make. The stock market had finally been resurrected. New York was a beacon on the hill. People came here to escape from where they had been, but Tilda felt like she needed to escape New York City to find out who she was.

The Depression years had been chaotic. At work she had met women who surprised her. Colored women who worked during the day next to her,

putting out the food that was magically dispensed through the little windows of the Automat, but who at night met in the apartments and bars of Harlem to talk about ideas and change.

So many people had poured into her city during the lean times, and apartments and lodgings were hard to come by. She had attended more than a few rent parties; she'd paid her two bits and brought her own bottle of wine. Food had been plentiful and not always what she was used to. Eventually, she'd stopped asking what ingredients were in the dishes placed before her and set her mind to just enjoying what was exotic to her tastes. The music and dancing were not the sedate offerings of her parents' friends' parties. Negro writers and actors drank cheap liquor and argued fervently over social issues.

Riding in the front seat of her father's cab she was able to take in and cherish all of the sights, all of the people, all of the craziness.

Tilda was tall and athletic looking. Her honey-blond hair may have come from a bottle, but it wasn't brassy or cheap; it suited her, and the wind that blew through her open window brushed it back from her face. She was not leaving for good, just for a little while. Like her two brothers and brother-in-law were just off fighting for a time and would be coming home to pick up where they left off before long.

People were saying it would be over soon, any day, in a few weeks, or months, but they had been saying that for years now. It had started before the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor. Europe had been struggling long before that. It was too late to have ended quickly.

Everyone just wanted it all to be over so that they could go on with their lives and pretend it had never happened. They wanted their lovers back, to make homes, to make livings, to have babies, and to never think about war again. If they could only hang on a little bit longer. If they could only survive the relentless war machine that sucked up everything: the men, the metal, the meat, the energy, the future of all who waited for it to be over.

Many of the men you saw on the streets were in uniform, either proudly wearing their medals or their newly issued clothing or struggling under the weight of those same medals and the horrors they had seen or committed. Sometimes they had limps or missing limbs to attest to the carnage they had seen.

She had saved her money, so she had enough to go someplace else, do something different. She would take her time; there was no place she needed

to be. She just had to outlast the Axis. Today she would buy a ticket to someplace she had never been before. Maybe she would stay there for a while, or maybe she would buy another ticket and move on. Maybe she would get only as far as New Jersey and change her mind. Maybe she would go all the way to San Francisco and then change her mind.

Outside the massive entrance of the train station, she stood with her luggage and watched her father's cab swerve across the lanes and swoop in to pick up his next fare. Turning toward the building, she hefted her bags and strode determinedly through the huge doors.

When she entered the cavernous hall, she felt dwarfed by the size and bustle of it. She stopped on the landing inside the wide entrance. The broad rotunda of the building was full of people coursing in all directions. The kiosk in the center slowed the flow as the stream of people swirled around it. Of course, she'd been there many times, but usually to greet family from other cities coming to visit. This building was meant to overwhelm and impress, and it did. One of her visiting aunts had sworn that she had seen all she needed to of New York City; she could go home a happy woman after having only visited Grand Central Station.

Of course, before the war it had been even busier. Now travel was curtailed as much as possible to conserve fuel for the war effort. A poster on the wall of a scowling Uncle Sam demanded, "Is this trip really necessary?" People didn't just take off to Florida or go to Chicago for the weekend now. You had to be going someplace important, to do something that couldn't wait.

Tilda had already come up with several good reasons for her trip, none of which were true, but each of which could be pulled out of her hat, if she were challenged. She was quite proud of herself for being so ingenious and prepared. Her favorite was the story where she was a bride hurrying to marry her beloved before he shipped off overseas. She had spent one whole evening concocting the details, almost to the point of believing them. At one point she nearly managed to urge a single tear from her eye, but lost interest before it could spill down her cheek.

END NOTE

More than 70 million people died in the war we know as World War II, 400,000 of them were Americans. All of our families were affected and changed forever. I wish that I had talked less and listened more to those family members who experienced what we can only imagine.

Use the QR Code below to enjoy British singer Vera Lynn singing “We’ll Meet Again” for the Royal Air Force in 1943.

