

SAPPHIRE PROMISE

BASED ON THE TRUE STORY OF LOYALTY, TRUST,
AND UNFAILING LOVE



SALLY BRANDLE



PROLOGUE



CALIFORNIA 2021

Annika dropped a bag of Earl Grey tea into the porcelain teacup—her wrinkled, sun-spotted hand showing evidence of her earliest decades spent in the tropics. The sapphire ring on her right hand still glowed deep, deep blue, and without thinking, she pressed it to her heart. A lock of silvery hair fell across her forehead. She brushed it back, and touched the bumpy scar at her hairline, vaulting an eighty-year-old memory into play.

Her body tensed while she relived the horrible moment of the noontime heat, the smell of petrol on the street, but worst of all, the crisp vision—a jeep full of Japanese enemies slowing as it drove by her, the passenger soldier glaring, the brake lights flashing a warning. The driver veered in front of her bicycle and stopped. She swung the handlebar to the right, parked on the shoulder, pulled out her Mobile Nurse card, and then bowed. One soldier jumped out and walked around her while another one stepped to her side and yelled

an angry order in Japanese. She remained bowed and prayed for God to protect her and Mamma from harm.

A rifle barrel whacked her knee from behind, pitching her forward until her kneecaps hit gravel. She thrust her hands out before face-planting. Keeping her head lowered and bare shins on the rough ground, she pressed her chest to her thighs. Was this enough groveling to stay alive?

“Bow!” the ugly voice shouted. A saber rattled.

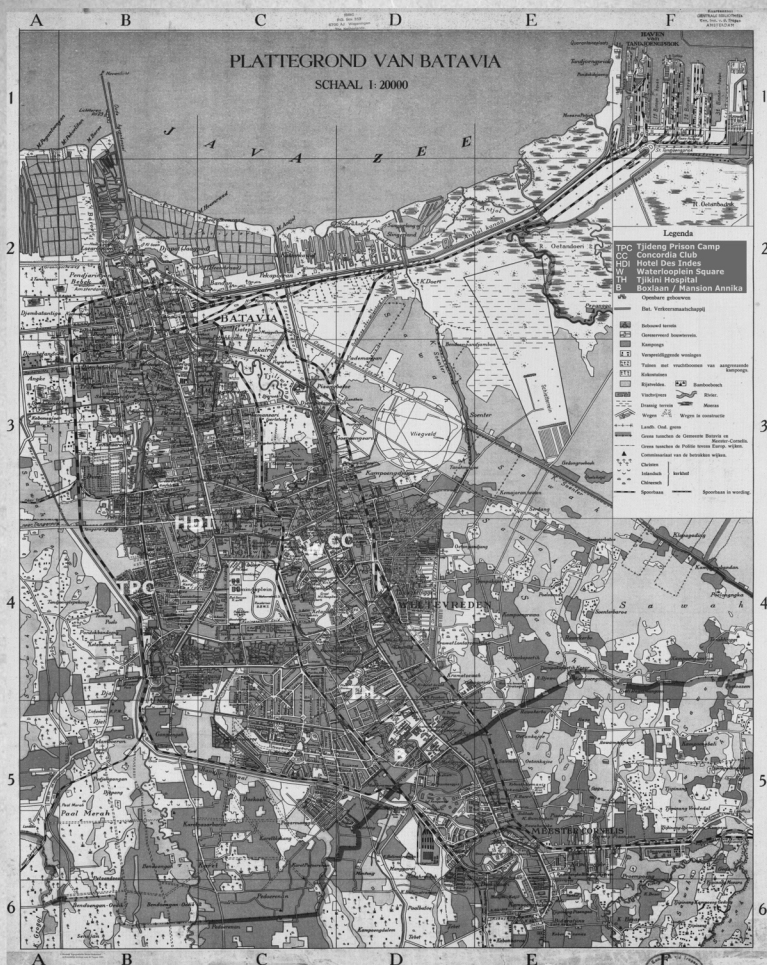
Please Lord, help me. She dropped her brow to the ground and stretched her shaking arms out ahead, palms down, as if prostrated in prayer.

“Bow!” he shouted again, and the sole of a boot pushed onto the back of her head and drove her forehead into sharp stones.

A whistling tea kettle jarred Annika back to the present. She slowly inhaled and exhaled and then poured steaming water over the teabag. The robust scent of the first brew brought a comfortable, calming warmth to her face.

Suffering brought enlightenment—a truth she’d read somewhere.

After sipping her tea and nibbling a cookie or two, she’d think back to the beginning—to the life she’d loved, the lessons she’d learned, and the wonderful people who had helped her through the toughest years of her life.



Locations of Annika's destinations
throughout Batavia

<https://esdac.jrc.ec.europa.eu/content/plattegrond-van-battavia>
(Specific area labels were added)

CHAPTER 1



APRIL 1939

- Hitler's Panzer tanks invade Czechoslovakia.
- Italy and Germany finalize a military alliance.
- Japanese Emperor Hirohito amasses a powerful Navy and Air Force. He uses poison gas against China.

BATAVIA, JAVA

When would Pappie get home to break up her quarantine exile with stories from the barn about her mare and her monkey? Annika Wolter paced another circuit between the Victrola record player that sat on her dresser and the armoire across the room. Two more days of seclusion upstairs and she'd be on horseback again instead of merely imagining rides on the hibiscus-filled trails. Thank the Lord her father's daily report through the closed

bedroom door brightened the endless hours of reading and practicing her ballet performance for Mamma's fiftieth birthday. What if she wasn't over the mumps by her mother's party, like the doctor had promised?

Annika pressed her finger under her right ear and found the receding, yet tender, swollen gland. "Little kleuters needing highchairs get mumps, not young ladies of fifteen and a half," she mumbled to herself, and leaned onto the windowsill. Apricot-scents from oleander flowers drifted into her second-floor bedroom from the hedge below, planted along the circular driveway which led to Mansion Annika. She bit her lip. A grand house named in your honor mattered little when you were stuck in one of the seven bedrooms.

At any moment, Pappie and the chauffeur should be rounding the bend of the road that led onto Boxlaan. She looked past the rows of flowers which lined their driveway. Wait. Who was that crossing their grass? A stranger approached from the far corner of the acre of lawn. Shades of copper shone in his dark brown hair. She stood on tip toes and leaned close to the glass in the upper part of the window. His stride proclaimed athlete, not the stiff walk of an old zakenman who might be headed here to visit Pappie on business.

He marched into full view, dressed in the white Dutch uniform of an officer. The hip-length coat fitted perfectly across his broad shoulders. Freshly pressed trousers covered his long legs and a small leather suitcase swung with each stride.

"Hmm." Annika tapped her cheek. Was this tall, mysterious guest a new boarder? If a herd of young soldiers preceded war, maybe war wouldn't be as horrible as Mamma and Pappie whispered. And no war had better start before she finished high school and completed nursing training, and

certainly not before she had her first boyfriend. She moved to the side, lest the visitor catch her staring, and tucked her sleeveless blouse inside the waistband of her wide-legged trousers.

He continued toward their front door and for a moment tilted his head to study the lone wrought iron balcony which jutted out from the bedroom to Annika's right. Her pulse thrummed. No man should be so dashing and handsome as to compete with Errol Flynn. He swung his head to take in the tennis courts on the property next door, then looked over his shoulder at the cricket fields across the street, as if trying to determine a connection to the view from the balcony. The handsome stranger turned back toward Annika and rubbed his chin. His curiosity upped her admiration even further. "I'm going to marry him," she whispered.

At the veranda overhang, he disappeared. She groaned. His footsteps sounded on the flight of stairs.

Verdorie! Damn, she hated this blasted room! Annika thumped her hand against her dresser. The turntable shook on the Victrola. "My song for Saturday's performance!" she cried, and examined the brittle, 78 rpm shellac record. Whew, no scratched grooves. Her fingers relaxed and she slid the twelve-inch disc into its paper sleeve.

The mysterious stranger's suitcase suggested an overnight stay. Mamma hadn't mentioned him when she'd deposited today's lunch outside her door. She batted aside the billowing white mosquito netting which surrounded her bed, then opened her door, and leaned into the hallway. Two more days of exile would kill her! He might be gone by then!

In the distance, protective barks grew louder from Foxy, the family's wire fox terrier. If her furry little friend could talk, he'd quiz the stranger for details. A firm rap sounded from the wooden front door on the main level.

How unfair that her dog got to meet their visitor days before she would. Annika left the door open but retreated into the bedroom. Her future husband's hair shone like the russet brown Djati wood of her furniture.

In her room, a pink scarf fluttered, one filmy end tucked under the thin ribbon of spiraling teak wood that decorated the top of the mirror on her vanity. Annika caught sight of her reflection. Mamma said she had a heart-shaped face, and fashion magazines noted that as a plus. She laid her fingers alongside her chin. What demeanor would impress the dashing officer? Solemn and brooding, à la Greta Garbo? She posed. Or flirty like Janet Gaynor, her favorite American Hollywood star? She lifted one eyebrow and widened her hazel eyes, turned sideways, and looked over her shoulder into the mirror.

Posing was a useless waste of energy. She blew a wisp of light brown, wavy hair from her forehead. He'd never consider her. She was ugly. That's what Pappie's friend, Herman, had told her on his visits when she was a little girl. "Annika," he'd say in his soothing tone, "you're so smart. You're from such a good family. Tsk, tsk. Too bad you're so ugly." Many times, she'd heard him repeat that horrible observation.

Another knock sounded from below. Where were Luther and Ahmad, their servants who ushered guests into their home?

Mamma called out, "I'll greet our new lodger." Her pumps clicked on the white marble floor as she approached the entry from the living room. The heavy door creaked open.

Lodger. How exciting. Not a curmudgeon like the other paid boarders they sometimes hosted for extra money. Did she dare step out to peek? Her bare feet made no noise as she crept out of her bedroom and across the polished stone hall-

way. A few feet back from the row of carved staircase balusters, she crouched with her fingertips on the floor for balance. If she tipped her head, she could look between the wooden spindles to see the tall stranger who stood at attention in the open doorway. He towered above Annika's barely five-foot tall Mamma. When he smiled, his angular face lost any formality, making him impossibly handsome. Annika's breath hitched in her throat.

"Thank you for accommodating me on short notice, Mevrouw Wolter." The rich, deep timbre of his voice stirred unfamiliar feelings in Annika. He defined her vision of a Hollywood leading-man. A sigh escaped, piercing the quiet of the empty hall.

The stranger bent and stroked Foxy's head. "I hope a two-week stay isn't an inconvenience." His gaze flicked toward Annika's perch.

She jerked backward, tipped onto her heels, and thrust her hands to the floor to keep her butt from smacking the marble. That was close. Too close. Rising slowly, keeping her back to the wall, she slipped inside her bedroom. Warmth rose in her cheeks. Had he seen her? She continued to eavesdrop, her hand gripping the door frame.

"Foxy, you furry pest. Go visit Annika." Mamma ordered. "Sorry, he's really no bother."

"The pup's an unexpected bonus," his friendly voice assured her mother.

"Good. We're happy to accommodate you, Lieutenant Van Hoven," Mamma said. "I understood from Marta's phone call that the steamship carrying her relatives from Holland arrived early, putting you out of a guest room."

Annika blew out her breath. Close call. Marta's twin daughters were her friends, both of them cute, and both of them currently without a boyfriend.

"That's correct," the lieutenant replied. "I appreciate

staying next door to family friends. My quarters on base aren't quite ready. War preparations are slow and steady."

"So we've heard," Mamma agreed. "We feel fortunate to have Marta and her family as close neighbors. Please come inside. Tea is served at four and dinner at seven. In the meantime, I set out a pitcher of fresh lemonade on the shady veranda. I'll ask Emily to point out your room and give you a house tour."

Not Emily! Annika pushed her forehead into the wall. Her lips puckered as if she'd bitten into one of the blasted lemons. Mamma often voiced a saying: "Bitter in de mond maakt het hart gezond," *Bitter in the mouth makes the heart healthy*. Hers ached in pain. She clasped her hands in prayer and whispered, "Please don't let him meet Emily. Please let her be out on an errand." Her older cousin had glossy brown hair, alabaster skin, and elegant manners.

The distinctive clicks of doggy toenails sounded on the marble stairs. Foxy nosed open Annika's door. He'd been the runt of the litter and weighed under fifteen pounds, but his curiosity and energy were boundless.

Annika knelt and stroked down her dog's white neck, black shoulder, and tan back. Her own muscled forearms were brown as a bridle from hours spent riding her horse, Maggy. She hadn't paled a fraction in the five days since she'd come down with mumps, even though she had been sealed off to prevent the horrible virus she'd caught at school from infecting her family and servants. Foxy nudged her and she buried her head in his rough, wiry fur. The scent of freshly mown grass tugged at her restless soul. She should've been out on their lawn to meet their guest. She slumped against her dresser and pulled Foxy onto her lap.

"Emily," Mamma called from downstairs.

Demure footsteps pattered on the hallway floor outside

Annika's room. Her worst nightmare continued. She listened intently.

"Yes, ma'am?" Sweet, refined Emily replied from the top of the stairs.

"Please meet Lieutenant Van Hoven. He's the new boarder I mentioned. I'd appreciate you showing him around."

Mamma spoke often of finding a suitor for Emily, and the young lieutenant fit the bill. Annika clutched her blouse at heart level. How could any man not fall for nineteen-year-old Emily, a not-so-poor orphan, and the epitome of a fashionable young lady? "Verdorie," she hissed again, and set Foxy on the floor.

Why did she have the cousin who looked every bit as much like a movie star as he did? Annika rose and looked out the window. Tears wet her eyes. Why couldn't Emily have stayed in Holland with her uncle after her parents died a few years ago? Why had she decided, out of all her Dutch relatives, to join their family in Batavia? And why, for heaven sakes, had Emily been available today as tour guide for the handsome lieutenant? Annika Wolter's handsome lieutenant!

Why? Because life wasn't fair.

Annika tapped her foot on the floor. Where was her father? Shouldn't Pappie be the one showing the new boarder around and learning the important facts about him?

"Ladies. Please, call me Phillip," his smooth voice drifted to Annika, the deep tone sending longing into her chest, soothing her frustration.

Emily murmured something, then the clipped military footsteps faded as the pair must've entered the long hallway below, flanked at the far end by the two bedrooms reserved for boarders. They'd be halfway to the altar by the time Annika got released from her prison.

She crossed her arms over her chest. Movement caught

her eye above a framed picture on the far wall. She dashed across the room and glimpsed the disappearing tip of a house gecko's tail. "If you're smart, you'll let me catch you," she advised the tiny intruder as she unhooked the watercolor painting of her horse. Cupping her hand, she gauged the spotted gecko's path and trapped it against the wall. "Gotcha." She gently carried it to the window, pushed her hand outside, and opened her fingers. The gecko stayed in her palm. She ran her finger over the gray body, spotted in black and white. "No hurry to leave? At least you have a choice." In an effortless leap, the gecko landed on the outside wall to her left. "The servants aren't as forgiving," she warned it before she pulled her arm in and drummed her fingers on the windowsill. Every other creature but Annika was headed somewhere today.

The gecko climbed up white stucco, past the small window of the storage room to her left, and then headed toward the red tile roof. Annika looked to the right. Only on the roof would the gecko have a better view than from her mother's private balcony. If the lieutenant asked, would Emily tell him how that balcony had been purposely positioned for Mamma to watch Pappie play tennis next door or cricket at The English Club fields on the other side of Boxlaan? Or that her parents had ordered the workers to chisel "Annika" into the cement floor of the balcony when they'd built here the year after her birth? That should be shared, too.

Pappie needed to get home to give out those details. She glanced at the English Sports Club on the corner a half block away. Overlooking the outdoor pool in the rear, a handful of businessmen in beige-colored suits sat at wicker patio tables. She frowned. If Pappie had stopped there first for his afternoon glass of whiskey, she wouldn't spot him without field glasses.

On the street outside the pool's fence, a horse pulled a two-wheeled buggy, or sado. Sunshine glinted off its metal roof. One passenger faced backward in the seat at the rear. The driver up front steered alongside a row of trees which kept the hot sun off the street vendors. Their tables would be loaded with fresh picked cucumbers, papaya, mango, and pineapple. Annika licked her lips and imagined the taste of ripe, sweet pineapple dipped in shaved coconut.

The sado stopped near the club's covered entry. A uniformed Indonesian doorman in a white turban assisted a stoop-shouldered man out of the rig. He shuffled inside and would probably spend the next few hours enjoying tea and pound cake while talking to his cronies in a cool corner and waiting for the dining room to open at seven. She'd often seen elderly men seated in rocking chairs on the veranda after she'd done laps in the club's swimming pool. Each time she'd passed them in the last few months they'd been arguing in Dutch about the Nazis.

Annika rubbed her temple. Could Hitler's plans of domination really stretch to peaceful Batavia, her home in the Dutch East Indies? No. Her fists clenched. She looked toward the horizon. Ninety miles to the west the peaceful Indian Ocean rippled onto their island's white sandy beaches, with Europe and Hitler thousands of miles beyond. Surely none of his tanks or planes could travel that far. She squinted. Right now, something was flying her way. Not a soaring falcon native to Java, but two biplanes that dipped and dodged one another high up in the blue sky. They circled and vanished, no doubt headed back to the military base before sunset at five-thirty. How did a soldier fill the twelve hours of daylight they received on Java year-round? Did they rise with the sun every morning between five and six, then get off duty at sunset between the same hours in the evening? She should ask Rudy, her oldest brother.

At this very moment, Rudy could be practicing in one of those biplanes. Annika pretended to be him by moving an imaginary center stick, adjusting goggles, and checking the gauges, exactly as Pappie and his friend had shown her when they'd taken her flying in a Piper Cub. Even by handling the controls for a few minutes, she'd felt the strange freedom Rudy often described he felt in a Koolhoven FK 51 aircraft, which the Royal Dutch Military had brought to Java for pilot training. If Rudy succeeded in joining the RAF out of England, where would he be sent to fight?

Goosebumps rose on her forearms. News clips at Batavia's movie theater warned of Hitler's threats. She closed her eyes and said a prayer for the German monster's swift defeat. Did she have the courage to confront an enemy, given the chance? She stared out the window again. Past the English Club's cricket fields sat The Batavia Civil Hospital for the poor. Since she'd been old enough to know what went on inside, she'd wanted to help sick people. That took plenty of courage, and medical knowledge helped in wartime.

In a metal case on her dresser sat the stethoscope Pappie had presented to her on her twelfth birthday. He'd known precisely what her dreams were, as always. Years of practice on tolerant pets and relatives had honed her skill in locating a heartbeat. Now she needed to practice patience. She wouldn't childishly pester any of the family with questions about Phillip. Instead, she'd show ladylike restraint. She straightened her spine and formed the slight suggestion of a reserved but approachable smile in the manner Oma Elodie had drummed into her.

What was she thinking? Pursuing someone so handsome was surely a lost cause. Annika dropped her chin to her chest. The boxy, stiff fronts of her pink ballet shoes caught her eye. She snatched them from beside her armoire, shoved in her feet, and tied the ribbons. The doctor had guaranteed

that by Mamma's birthday celebration on Saturday night, her glands would be normal, and she wouldn't be contagious.

Only forty-eight hours remained for her to perfect the final pirouette of her Chopin piece and impress Phillip with her one talent. As she moved her body to balance en pointe, more than her toes ached.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Multiple-award winning author Sally Brandle weaves slow-burning romance into edgy suspense, motivating readers to trust their instincts. Growing up as a tomboy alongside brothers prepared her to work in a male-centric industry, raise sons, and create action-packed stories featuring strong women. She thrives on creating unintentional heroines who conquer their vulnerabilities and partner with heroes to outwit cunning villains. Penning Iris's story presented a challenge to stay true to her life while portraying the colonial aspect of *Sapphire Promise* in a sensitive manner. Research and consultations with a variety of experts is her way of checking facts. Her rescued Tuxedo cat, Shepherd dog, and Blue Heeler are her companions during long spells of writing or bouts of tormenting weeds in her garden. Afternoons she often spends riding on the wind with her thirty-one years young Quarter Horse. Find Sally on:

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Sixty-One Years of Love and Devotion



Iris, our heroine, and Sally

