

If you want to find yourself immersed in time, in a story that will capture your heart, you'll love *Books Afloat!*

— USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR SUSAN MAY
WARREN

Delores Topliff captures the can-do spirit of WWII and 1940s America in her debut novel, *Books Afloat*, as Anne Mettles overcomes the odds against her to bring her beloved books to families living along the Columbia River. Intriguing characters, a sweet romance, a suspenseful twist—readers will long remember this story beyond “The End.”

— PATRICIA BRADLEY, WINNER OF A READER CHOICE
AWARD IN SUSPENSE, AND AUTHOR OF THE *LOGAN POINT*
SERIES, *MEMPHIS COLD CASE NOVELS*, AND THE *NATCHEZ*
TRACE PARK RANGER BOOKS

In her debut novel, Delores Topliff skillfully combines adventure, history, and romance into an intriguing story set on the Columbia River during World War II. I cheered for courageous Anne Mettles and her crewmates as they traveled in *Books Afloat*, a sailing library, meeting one-of-kind characters along the way while facing the threat of possible espionage. Topliff beautifully captures the power of pursuing one's dreams.

— BETH K. VOGT, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
OF THE THATCHER SISTERS SERIES, CHRISTY AWARD &
CAROL AWARD WINNER

To my cherished long-suffering family and friends for the times I zone out before returning to home base. You also provide great story material and the best heart-filling memories

BOOKS AFLOAT

Columbia River Undercurrents ♦ Book One

Delores Topliff



Scrivenings
PRESS

Quench your thirst for story.

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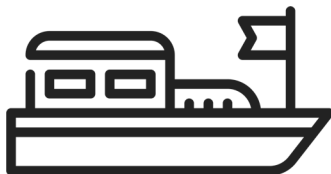
All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either fictional or historical, is purely coincidental.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Years ago, our local librarian nourished my love for books. When I was ten, she told me I read more books than anyone else in our community and asked what I wanted to do when I grew up. I said, “Start a floating library houseboat for folks along the river who don’t have books.” *Books Afloat* is the result.

As a child, I asked the Lord to never let me be bored. He’s kept His end of that bargain. I’m thankful it includes writing! Susan May Warren and Rachel Hauck’s writing retreats were life-changing. Besides delivering writing skills, they’ve provided lifelong friends who pray, laugh, and cheer each other on. I can’t imagine life without them. Three of the best are Pat Trainum (writing as Patricia Bradley), Beth K. Vogt, and Alena Tauriainen.

Thanks to former student/always friend, Joseph N. King, for naming *Books Afloat*.



Tuesday, June 16, 1942

Vancouver and Olympia, Washington

“**T**ed Vincent, I don’t need a chaperone to drive me to Olympia.” I whip around and glare, the musical background of my beloved Columbia River not soothing me this morning.

Men can be so difficult sometimes. Ted’s making me sorry I walked to the A-1 Garage to borrow his car. During his break, he’s out front, rag in hand, dusting a gleaming fender.

“If you won’t let me drive Henrietta, I’ll ride the bus.”

“That bus doesn’t run today, Annie.” He rubs away a water spot. “It’s just that she can be cranky, and I’ve never let anyone else drive her. Tell me again why this is important now? During wartime?”

I let out my breath with a whoosh. What’s with Ted? Since I moved from Oklahoma to Vancouver during high school, Ted usually understands what matters. Why doesn’t he get this?

“You’ve heard me a hundred times. Having a library during the terrible Dust Bowl days gave us kids hope. Books taught us

there was life worth aiming for in a world beyond our troubles. Books saved my life." I say it so passionately I blink back tears. "Besides, I promised Grandpa."

"Promised him what?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you some other time."

"Okay, maybe I get it."

Ted moves his cloth my way as if he might dab my eyes but apparently thinks better of it and stuffs it in his pocket.

"And you want to give others the same opportunity now. Even if it's dangerous?"

In the distance, boats sparkle in sunlight, and ocean-going vessels unload at the grain elevators. To the east, Mt. Hood is a glittering triangle shining like a promise. I can't wait to pull up anchor. I won't even consider getting turned down.

"Being alive is dangerous," I answer. "People get hurt climbing out of bed or crossing the street. But if God's in this, He'll keep me safe." I glance at his car. "And even help me drive Henrietta. I promise I won't hurt her—she'll be fine."

Maybe Ted's car means more to him than me. But Henrietta Ford doesn't tease him like I do.

"It's not Henrietta I'm worried about. I want *you* to stay fine." Ted exhales an exasperated sigh. "If I'd known sooner, I could've arranged time off work to take you myself."

"But you don't need to." *Is that the problem? He thinks I'm leaving him out?* "I would never ask you to do that. You're vital to the war effort."

"As a mechanic?" His face forms a question mark.

"A really *good* mechanic. It's time you knew that." I uncross my arms. I'm tired of Ted not seeing his value, but then I don't have a father with super-high expectations like his. "Besides, I only got the call last night that Governor Langlie could meet with me today. I have to get to the capital before he changes his mind. Please understand how much this matters."

My stomach knots. I must find a way. Since moving here and seeing that people along the river have no libraries, I've dreamed of helping them. After all, where would I be without books? Or Grandpa believing in me, even when Mom and Dad didn't?

Ted rubs the back of his neck, catching and holding my gaze until my heart stutters.

"I'd feel awful if you got stranded," he says. His eyes mirror concern

"I won't. I promise."

"Maybe I can still get off work." He jerks his head to flip the sandy-brown hair hanging over his eyes back where it belongs. "You're not going alone."

"Yes, I am. What could go wrong?" My voice rises, and I lift a hand to count fingers. "You taught me to change tires, change oil—even hotwire cars that won't start." I'm scoring points and pleading silently. He must agree. "Besides, you keep her running perfectly."

"Pretty much." The furrow across his forehead eases. "What would your folks say?"

"You know them. They're nearly two thousand miles away, helping Grandma. They have opinions but pretty much leave decisions to me."

I see Ted weakening. He rocks back on his heels and studies the sky. It's perfect weather for river navigation, just what I need to launch *Books Afloat*.

"If your meeting weren't so important, I wouldn't consider it."

"But you will?" I fling my arms around his neck. "Thanks. I promise I'll baby her."

"I know." He holds me close a moment after I let go. "I'm happy I said yes."

"Thanks for trusting me."

His Brylcreem aroma sends pleasant thoughts to my brain.

An odd disappointment stings my heart when he releases me. I almost hug him again but instead blaze a smile into his eyes.

Ted's blush makes the freckles across his nose and cheeks stand out. When he shoves his right hand into his pocket, something rattles.

"What's that?"

"The magnets I carry." He clicks them together, and the noise repeats.

"I bet you even sleep with those," I tease.

"Naw." More red creeps up his neck as he grins. "But they come in handy lots of times. Do you know what the governor wants?"

"I hope he's going to finance my library boat. He'd phone or send a letter to turn me down, wouldn't he?"

"Probably." He opens the hood to check the oil. "She starts like a charm but has a racy engine under there." He cocks his head. "Kind of like you."

"Me?" My hands find my hips. "Ted Vincent, what are you saying?"

"Good things." He laughs.

My eyes widen. Where is mild, reliable Ted today? Right now, he looks like he has a racy engine under his hood, too.

"I wish I could come along." His eyes deepen from gray to green.

"I'll be back before you know it. Besides, you'd get bored in government offices."

"With you there? Not a chance. I hate for any woman to go alone—even if you are over twenty-one now."

"I had to grow up fast, and I'm not *any* woman." I draw myself to full height, which brings me past his chin. "I'll soon be the first one to pilot a boat down the Columbia to the Pacific."

He closes the hood and opens the driver's door with a flourish. "Here's the key. Good luck."

Before he closes my fingers over the key, it glitters in

sunlight like gold. I step on the running board, and he helps me in.

“Thanks again.” My voice trembles, and I smile until my cheeks hurt.

“Phone as soon as you’re back, and I’ll get Henrietta. Then you can tell me all about Olympia, and we’ll celebrate.”

“I appreciate this more than I can say.” My eyes catch his—they’re even darker green now than before—but then he looks away.

“I know.”

I crank open the window and turn the key in the ignition. The engine catches with a satisfying purr that broadens Ted’s smile.

“Don’t take her above 50.”

“But the speed limit’s 60.” I press the ahooga horn and lurch past him, scattering gravel.

“Have a great trip.” He gives a jaunty wave, his voice carefree.

But my glimpse of him in the rearview mirror doesn’t look carefree. Does he think the governor might turn me down?

HEART in my throat and generating confidence I don’t yet feel, I turn the brass knob on the frosted glass door leading to the Governor’s chambers. One glimpse reveals his inner sanctum is safeguarded behind this outer entryway. This chamber is fancier than I expected with stylish furniture, polished floors, and shelves of leather-bound books from ceiling to floor.

But it’s Miss Pruitt I’m eager to meet. The professional behind the ornate mahogany desk is the governor’s right hand and devoted guard dog. By letter and phone, she’s guided me and *Books Afloat* through every stage of creation to today’s final grant approval. We haven’t met but recognize each other instantly.

“Miss Pruitt,” I cry, like someone just coming home for the holidays.

“Anne!”

She springs up from her desk and extends her hand as I quickly cross the parquet floor. We linger, shaking hands, our smiles cordial. She looks older than her cheerful phone voice suggests. She’s sizing me up, too.

“I’m so pleased to meet you. So grateful for everything you’ve done.”

“I hope your long drive was okay.”

“Fine.” But if it hadn’t been, I wouldn’t admit it.

Suddenly her lipsticked mouth wilts under her Victory helmet hairstyle. “I’m so sorry,” she says, dropping my hand and looking down.

“Sorry? About what?” I flex my fingers as icy shivers travel down my spine.

She glances toward the Governor’s office. “This isn’t turning out as we hoped. I’m thankful I collected all those culled books for you. I know we promised state funding, but—”

“But Pearl Harbor and its aftermath happened.” A man’s deep voice booms from the office. His shadow slides across the doorway before he appears.

As soon as I see him, I stand so fast my chair wobbles. Governor Langlie. There is no mistaking him. He matches newspaper photos—stylish gray hair, smart dresser. When he shakes my hand, his spicy aftershave tickles my nose.

“Welcome to Olympia,” he says in the deep voice I’ve often heard on the radio. “Forgive my intrusion, but I asked Miss Pruitt for time alone with you to balance our bad news.”

“I’ll let you two talk in private.” Miss Pruitt rises and scoops books and papers aside as the governor moves to her desk.

My gaze follows this woman, who has been so instrumental in planning and equipping my floating library, as her high heels

clack down the hall. Swallowing nervousness, I face the governor.

He pins me with intense brown eyes and waves for me to sit before sitting himself. “Your proposal to take books to people on both sides of the Columbia all the way to the Pacific is stellar—American ingenuity at its finest. The kind of project I love to champion in normal times.” He leans forward. “But these are not normal times. Where were you when Roosevelt addressed our nation after Pearl Harbor?”

“About to eat lunch.” That memory is stamped forever in my brain. Sunday lunch after church, the announcement interrupted soft piano music on the radio as I sat down with two good friends to a meal we never ate. “It’s a day I’ll never forget.”

“It ruined our dinner, too.” Governor Langlie nods. “And drastically shifted state and national budgets. War costs are devastating. Miss Pruitt was about to say that we’re terribly sorry, but we can’t fund your proposal this year after all.”

His words strike my gut like a fist. I quit breathing.

“You can’t?” I dumbly echo his words. “B-but each planning letter was approved. I thought that was why I’m here.”

He rocks back, sadness lining his face. “You’re wondering why I had you come all this way when I could have explained by phone and saved you the trip.”

“Frankly, yes.” I clasp my hands tighter, so he won’t see them shaking. I’ve worked months to win his support.

A twinkle brightens his eyes. “I admit to using subterfuge so I could talk to you in person. I don’t have library funds, but I do need a boat, and the military has money.” He studies me a long moment. Apparently satisfied with what he sees, he continues. “Your floating library is a perfect cover.”

“Cover? For what?” I try to see where this is going but can only focus on his ‘no.’

“It’s my business to watch events on the river. Your

neighbor, Smitty, is a good man, a legendary captain, and my friend.”

“You know Smitty?” My retired tugboat captain neighbor taught me everything I know about boats—even helped me lease and prepare *Books Afloat*. “What does he have to do with—”

“A lot. Have you been following Japanese activity since Pearl Harbor?”

Pearl Harbor and its aftermath have already claimed several high school friends, maybe even Josh. Ted would be in the Pacific with him now, except for his flat feet.

“The media doesn’t tell us much.” I flounder. The governor jumps topics faster than a grasshopper in a summer cornfield. “It’s hard to get information, but Smitty did mention recent bombings in Alaska.”

“One hundred Americans died when Japanese planes dive-bombed Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians.” His lips tighten. “The Aleutians are steppingstones to Seattle. That Alaska diversion divided our forces while they attacked Midway.”

Midway. That awful word again. I try to stop twisting my hands. We’re guessing Josh was near there the last time he wrote. Nothing since.

“Forgive me for being insensitive.” The governor’s voice gentles. “Smitty mentioned a good friend of yours is missing there.”

I press my feet hard against the floor to steady myself. “Josh Vengeance. His last letter hinted he might be near there, but no one is sure. There’s no conclusive report.”

The governor pulls a map of the Pacific from under the desk blotter and taps the island with his fingernail. “Midway was our greatest victory since the disaster at Pearl Harbor. Each day we get news of more missing sailors being found. Don’t give up hope.”

I picture Josh’s eager face and teasing blue eyes. Navy officers told his folks he was assigned to the sunken *Yorktown*

but also helped make supply runs to shore. After torpedoes hit, he was officially listed as Missing in Action. But if there was any way to survive, Josh would find it.

“I’m sure he’ll make it back.”

“I hope you’re right.” The governor taps the map again and shifts his gaze as if he’s reached a major decision. “We have a network of volunteers tracing sightings of Japanese heading this way.”

The hair rises on my neck. “Seriously? How close are they?”

“Close enough. They’re moving down the coast and have been sighted near the mouth of the Columbia. We withhold updates until we have confirmation so we don’t spook the public.” He steepled his fingers. “It’s a fine balance.”

“I’m sure.” I won’t think about Japanese military on the U.S. mainland.

The governor stands and paces to the window, his hands clasped behind his back, but then he turns and peers my way. “The Japanese wouldn’t suspect a boat full of books as being a threat.” His fingers count. “If you would perform visual checks, record data, and maintain occasional radio contact . . .”

He stops to scrutinize me. “Sorry to add pressure, but because of a military timetable, you need to complete the first trip in thirty days.” His eyelids drop, reading my expression. “Is this too much for you?”

“Not at all.” I swallow hard, my pulse racing. I long to help people along the river but didn’t bargain for this. It’s even better. I didn’t dream I could help the war effort, too. My spine tingles as I square my shoulders. This is the kind of thing that would thrill my Grandpa. “I’ll be proud to help.”

“Good.” He leans closer. “What I’m suggesting involves secrecy and risk. I’ve talked with Oregon’s governor. If you do surveillance for both sides of the river, Oregon will also give library support.” He peers at me over his glasses. “This is highly confidential.”

“As a top advisor, Smitty works closely with me. I’ll communicate with you directly sometimes. For your own protection, you’ll know the names of some volunteers, but not all of them.” He takes a folded paper from his breast pocket and glances at it. “Smitty will accompany your first trip. I swear that man drinks from the Fountain of Youth.”

“You’re right.”

We laugh at our shared joke.

“My pilot exam is Friday, and Smitty says I’m ready. We’ve worked hard for six months. If I don’t pass,” I laugh, “the fault’s only mine.”

The governor gives a salute. “As a matter of fact, you remind me of my wife. She also earned her college degree with honors in three years. You’ve accomplished a lot for someone barely past twenty-one.

Gratitude swells my heart. “Actually, I just turned twenty-two. Thanks for believing in and supporting me.” *Especially since my folks don’t.*

He uses a pen from Miss Pruitt’s desk to scribble a note. “No thanks needed. I love to find promising individuals and help them become key leaders. We’ll call this the Governor’s Challenge.”

“Yes, sir, that’s perfect.”

As he stands and rounds the desk to shake my hand once more, his spicy aftershave envelopes me again.

“I see you have a camera.” He inclines his head toward the Kodak Brownie I brought to document the contract signing. We hear high heels tap our way “Here comes Miss Pruitt now. May I have her take our picture together?”

“I’d love that.”

When Miss Pruitt enters, the governor hands her my Kodak. “Please snap us together.”

“Certainly.” Miss Pruitt smiles and gestures for us to pose in front of the U.S. and Washington State flags flanking her desk.

“Send me a photo when they’re developed,” the governor says. “I’ll keep one on my desk to remember to pray.”

“I appreciate that.” I gather my things in a daze.

I leave the capitol building, barely watching where I’m going. I’m so focused on the governor’s words I forget to count the forty-two granite steps in front of the structure marking Washington as the forty-second state to enter the Union.

Raucous white seagulls call overhead until one swoops low, forcing attention.

“I’ll see plenty of you when I reach the Pacific. Then I’ll fling handfuls of breadcrumbs to you every direction.” I hop in Ted’s car and let my mind race the three-hour drive home. He’ll be surprised that in grim economic times, I have library funding after all.

If it hadn’t been for library books during Oklahoma’s Dust Bowl, I would have dried up and blown away like our farm’s topsoil. I gulp, remembering Grandpa’s words. ‘Get all the learning you can, girl.’

Sure enough, books brought me from dry fields and small horizons to broader opportunities. Now I can pass on that gift to others, so circumstances don’t imprison them. Plus, guard America’s mainland. The stirring beat of marching bands fills my head.

I’ll share some of this information with my folks before *Books Afloat* sails but won’t tell everything. I miss them since they’re in Oklahoma, working to save Grandma’s farm, but they considered my library dream nonsense from the start.

‘We love you, daughter, but we learned the hard way that flighty ideas don’t put food on the table,’ Dad had said. ‘Only gumption and hard work do that. Besides, education is mostly wasted on girls. Wait and see—when this war ends, women will stop working outside the home. It’s always been that way, and it always will.’

I’m glad they aren’t here asking questions. Even with Smitty,

my ace-in-the-hole captain's support, they don't want me traveling the river. What would they say if they knew I had an active wartime role? I. Will. Not. Tell. Them.

Can I meet Governor Langlie's expectations? Uncertainty sends shivers over my body and raises the hairs on the back of my neck. I'll do my best or die trying. I pray lots driving home. *Lord, give me gumption. And help Josh, wherever he is.*

I drive past my driveway to turn into Smitty's, passing the neatly-trimmed evergreen hedge guarding his apple tree and the circular flower bed of bright-colored perfumy roses surrounding his bird feeder. As soon as I park the car, he opens his front door and stands on the porch smiling, his faded gold-braid captain's hat pushed back.

"Welcome home, Annie. Governor Langlie phoned. I'm proud of you."

I rush into his hug. We have lots to discuss. And I'll phone Ted—but not my folks.

THREE JAM-PACKED DAYS LATER, Smitty calls from the wharf, "You'll do fine, Annie, girl. Stay confident."

Standing at the helm, I smile my thanks. Ted boards and scurries past Smitty, hoisting a heavy trunk of books in his well-muscled arms as if it holds feathers.

"Annie, where shall I put this?"

"Here in the main library room, Hercules. Or shall I call you Popeye? I know that weighs a ton."

"It's not so bad."

I move the woven curtain aside as Ted muscles the trunk into the center of the enclosed room. Smitty helped me maximize space here and even knocked some shelves together. Color-coded children's books line lower spaces. General and

popular reading fill our mid-height spaces, and reference books and magazines occupy higher spots.

Nicely displayed favorites are centered on child-sized tables with groupings of polished rocks, seashells, and arrowheads nearby to raise interest. It's the kind of library I loved to explore as a kid.

I think Ted approves, too. His grin reaches his eyes as he dusts off his hands.

When did his shoulders get so broad? He's surprisingly strong for his medium build. He's not movie-star handsome—more like Hollywood's heart-warming Jimmy Stewart with his shy boy-next-door sweetness. And I can count on him. Good old Ted is always ready to help.

"Smitty and I will wait on shore while you pass your pilot exam," he says.

"Fair enough." Smiling so wide my teeth are a target for bugs, I turn the brass key that thrums the boat's engine to life. Its throaty roar belches oily diesel plumes into this morning's electric blue sky. Beyond, the mighty Columbia River rolls west like a blue-green ribbon unspooling in sunlight, its waves sparkling and splashing.

As soon as I ace this exam, I'll lift anchor and chug *Books Afloat* one hundred and six nautical miles to the Pacific to defend my country.

Feet planted, I make my first entries in the ship's log in flowing black ink using my best Palmer Method handwriting: Date: June 19, 1942. Home port: River Mile 106, Vancouver, Washington. Destination: Mouth of the Columbia. Cargo: Library books and materials for towns and people along the river between Vancouver and the Pacific.

I won't record my other duties.

Today, for luck, Ted wears his beloved Fort Vancouver High sweatshirt. My favorite picture ever is of him and Josh standing side by side in those shirts, clowning the day before graduation.

I ache now, seeing Ted alone without Josh here. Where you saw one, you saw the other, Ted's tousled sandy hair next to Josh's almost red. Ted's sober gray-green eyes next to Josh's blue, sparkling with mischief.

Two men trapped in the ship's sinking hull were rescued after they fired machine gun rounds to attract attention. We pray constantly though hope fades. It's especially hard for Ted, whose friendship with Josh made them like brothers.

But today, I must focus. I need my pilot's license to get underway, since only pilots can take boats across the treacherous bar at the Columbia's mouth. Piece of cake. I don't require the advanced license since we won't carry paying passengers. I pace the deck with nervous energy as I look up and down the road for the testing officer to arrive. Lord, let him hurry. I can't wait to get underway.

On shore, Ted lifts his hands in prayer.

Beside him, Smitty shouts, "Looking good. You were born for this," and flashes a V for Victory sign.

That boosts my confidence, and I stand straighter. "Where's Evie?" I call. Smitty's niece will travel with us after the Coast Guard testing officer leaves, so there will be three of us on board—not just Smitty and me, for appearance's sake. I shade my eyes. "What have you heard from her?"

He frowns. "Not much. There's a delay, but she'll make it."

"Sounds good!" I assemble paperwork and maintenance records, adding my thick stack of passed navigation tests. After today's practical exam, we can raise anchor.

I hiccup as a sleek black government car sweeps our way and brakes to a stop. The examiner hops out. His large angular nose divides dark eyes that remind me of olive pits.

He stands at attention in gold-trimmed starched whites, doffing the stiff military hat covering his salt and pepper crew cut to snap off a smart salute. "Request permission to come aboard."

“Permission granted, sir.”

He climbs on board without returning my welcoming smile. “Ship’s log?”

“Here, sir.” Sweat trickles down my back.

He thumbs through my paperwork and grunts. “Just because you’ve passed written tests doesn’t mean you’ll qualify today. Many grown men don’t, and you’re a woman.” He looks me over from head to toe. “Young, too.”

“I’ve been trained by the best.” I glance at Smitty. “And I’m older than I look.”

“I hope so.”

This man’s attitude curdles my stomach. He doesn’t like me. If Josh were here, he’d charm the man before he set foot on deck. Josh has that way about him.

“Take me below to your engine room.” He opens his clipboard to remove a checklist and follows me into the boat’s belly. “Read me your gauge settings.”

I call out oil pressure, gas mixture, engine speed, and depth finder numbers. Ears straining for his commands.

“This is no job for a woman.”

I barely catch his muttered words. Did he really say that? Doesn’t he know that with so many men gone to war, America’s women must fill the gaps? Our world is changing.

Climbing back to the main deck, his fingers drum his clipboard. “Back her out at five knots, take her across to Hayden Island.”

“Aye, aye.” Hayden is directly across the main channel. I’ve taken many practice runs there. I wrap my hands around the wheel, so I won’t be tempted to swipe that smirk off his face. But five knots isn’t enough power. I stare. What is he thinking? “Are you sure, sir?”

“You heard me. Five knots.”

I white-knuckle the tiller and fight for control as our slow

speed turns *Books Afloat* crosswise in the strong current. She bucks, refusing to head where I steer, drifting off course.

The man squiggles black marks. I've never been seasick, priding myself on good sea legs, but now clammy heat climbs my neck and thickens my throat. I will not be sick.

"Wheel sharp hard to Hayden's west end."

Our depth finder reads fifteen feet and falling. We need twelve. By Geological Survey charts, I'm in trouble. I catch my breath but hold my mouth shut.

"Turn sharper," he snaps. "Add speed or you'll hit."

The boat strikes soft mud and shudders. I grip the tiller but lose balance and stagger as the prow sticks fast in sand and muck.

"What happened, missy?" He gives an icy I-told-you-so glare.

"I did what you said." I swallow acid.

His grin stabs. "Mature pilots use sound judgment." He scribbles something, signs his name with a flourish, and hands me a pink sheet. "Retest in thirty days. Don't feel bad. Most grown men need two or three times to pass. One woman earned her papers, but that was a fluke. When hers expire, they won't be renewed."

I know of her, Smitty's sister-in-law, Charlotte. But defeat sours my mouth, and I swallow more bile. "I don't have thirty days. Governor Langlie wants this trip completed in thirty days."

"Sorry, missy. That's not my concern. I don't care if Roosevelt himself gives you orders. People meet my standards. You've shown again, this job isn't for women." He snaps his clipboard shut and jams his pen back into his pocket. "I'll back your boat out to show you how it's done—if your propeller's okay."

"It better be," I whisper. Teeth clenched, I bite my cheek, so I won't say anything more.

A thin smile curves his lips as he grasps the tiller and expertly backs my boat out.

I hiss out the air I've held, and my stomach lurches like the Titanic hitting the iceberg.

I've never been seasick. Not once. But now I lunge for the rail and lose my morning coffee over the rail.

He watches and smirks.

"That's never happened before," I say, wiping my mouth.

"Sure." He docks with a flourish as smooth as a hand entering a glove and marches across the wharf. He nods at Ted, salutes Smitty, starts his car, and drives away.

I wrap my arms around my stomach and stare after him. I'm glad my folks aren't here,

Even before the examiner's road dust clears, Smitty runs toward me, but Ted is faster, even on flat feet, and reaches me first.

Ted's hands bookmark my shoulders as his concerned eyes stare into mine. "Annie, what happened?"

I slump and can't return his gaze. "I failed."