



*Friday, June 19, 1942*

*Port of Vancouver, Washington, River Mile 106*

“I don’t know what to say, Annie.” Smitty’s shoulders sag. “The men at the grain elevators have a waitlist for river pilots. There’s a shortage everywhere.”

My slumped shoulders match his. I’d hoped there’d be a pilot at the wharf. What if I can’t realize my dream? And I have to meet the governor’s request. He believes in me.

“If anything else goes wrong—”

“Don’t give up.” Smitty grips my hand. “Overcoming hardships is who you are. The people along this river need you.”

“But I’m not sure I can pull it off. Maybe God doesn’t want me doing this after all. What if my folks are right, and I belong in Oklahoma?”

Smitty clucks his tongue. “You don’t believe that. I love your folks, but they birthed an amazing daughter with big dreams capable of making them happen. And God’s in it. Don’t lose sight of that.”

I hear commotion and see Ted lope to the wharf in long strides, waving and shouting.

“Josh’s dad has Charlotte and Evie. They’re almost here.”

“What? Charlotte’s coming?”

He skids to a stop. “Pastor Bob’s friend found her near Astoria and is driving her and Evie to meet Bob halfway. He left early, so they’re almost here.”

I squeal. “Soon, you say?”

Smitty claps Ted on the back.

“Any minute.” Ted smiles so broadly his ears rise.

“I could dance a jig.”

I grab Ted’s arm and swing him around until we’re breathless.

“It’s nice seeing you happy.”

He holds me loosely while I steady, then releases me.

“I like being happy.” His touch still warms my skin.

We watch a ’35 Buick rattle toward us, honking.

“Thank God, that’s them.” Smitty waves the car over.

When it pulls up, I hug Pastor Bob while the women exit. Charlotte steps out first, then Evie, her slim perky daughter, who doesn’t resemble her mother much.

Visibly tired from the ride, the stocky woman in Navy coveralls wears a bright yellow Sou’wester hat smashed down on steel-gray hair. A compass dangles from her pocket loops, along with so many gadgets and tools, she jingles as she walks. My kind of woman—she looks ready for any kind of action.

“You’re lifesavers.” I welcome them. “I don’t know *how* Pastor Bob found you in time, but thank God.”

“Yes, He’s responsible. And this beats the fish cannery I was on.” Charlotte sniffs the air. “Smells better, too.”

After carrying her gear on board, Pastor heads to his house to get Sue. Meanwhile, I show Charlotte and Evie around.

“Welcome to *Books Afloat*. She’s fifty feet from bow to stern and fifteen feet wide.” I sweep my arm around to point out

different areas. “Our head and galley are down those stairs along with the engine room and sleeping berths for two. There’s another short set of stairs aft. Much of our main deck is dedicated to the enclosed library plus an outer office and chairs on deck where we can relax if there’s time to grab a breath.”

“That won’t happen much,” Charlotte says matter-of-factly.

I point up the stairs. “Your berth is up top, near my captain’s cabin. What do you think?”

“So far, she looks good.” Charlotte runs her hand along the red-trimmed rail above the white hull. “Neat and trim, the way a boat should be. If her engine’s as good as her outside, she’ll slice through the water fine.” She takes off her hat to fan her face. “Excuse my Sou’wester. The days I wear it, it doesn’t rain— as simple as that. But if I forget, the skies drop oceans.”

“Then wear it all you want.” I laugh.

Smitty rolls his eyes.

“I put your bag up top, Mrs. Young.” Ted pumps her hand.

Charlotte stiffens. “Forget Mrs. Young—not even Charlotte, please. Call me Char if you value your life. I can’t stand long names. I just want to be a crewman like the rest of you doing my part in this war.”

I level a sharp look. Does she know our boat serves a second purpose? Does Pastor Bob know? “Did Pastor Bob tell you I’ll pay what I can?”

“No need.” She waves a dismissive hand. “J.P.’s Navy check comes regular, plus Smitty makes sure we don’t lack. We just need air to breathe, bread to chew, something to drink, and clean laundry sometimes. A body doesn’t need much in this world to be happy.” Her blue eyes gleam, and she shades them to check the horizon. “When can we get underway?”

“As soon as Pastor Bob gets back to send us off with a prayer.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ted near Smitty’s car. He lifts a bag from the trunk and hoists it over his shoulder.

I block him at the steps. “What are you doing?”

“Coming along. Smitty and I want you to have a man on board.”

I don’t budge. “Thanks, but you’re needed on land.”

“You don’t want a man?” Char interrupts. “It might be nice having one on board.” She glances from Ted to Smitty and back to me. “As headstrong as I am, I listen to Smitty, just like I do J.P. —I respect them both that much.” Char drops her eyelids to half-mast and shakes herself like a wet dog flinging water as if even saying her husband’s name might make her weep. “If this nice young man can come, I say let him. Extra hands always help.”

“But it’s wartime, and our best men are gone.”

Ted winces.

I catch his look. “Sorry. That came out wrong. I mean, Ted’s a great mechanic, the best in town, so the garage where he works can’t spare him.”

His eyes flash. “Annie. It’s worked out—I traded schedules with a friend. We’ll switch back when he needs time off. Besides —” He gulps. “I promised Josh.”

“Promised him what?”

“A promise Ted and I will both keep.” Smitty’s voice is low and calm. “Your trip will be safer with a mechanic on board. Accept it.”

“That sounds good,” Charlotte insists.

“Am I outnumbered here?” My voice rises.

“Thank you, Mrs. Young.” Ted nods her direction.

Char’s throat makes a strained sound. She glares until Ted literally backs up.

“Oops, what did I do?”

Her hands send semaphore signals and her eyebrows beetle. “Mrs. Young be hanged. Ted, so far, I like you. But whether you come on this trip or not, I’m Char—not Charlotte, not Mrs. Young, or you’ll face terrible consequences.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He touches his cap. “No offense meant. Is J.P. your husband?”

“That he is. Twenty-eight years strong and counting.” She softens and sniffs. “Their mother loved fancy names. J.P. is John Paul Jones Young, Smitty’s younger brother, gone to war.” She jerks a hand in Smitty’s direction. “You know his real moniker’s not *Smitty*, don’t you?”

“It’s not?” I’m all ears.

Smitty reddens. “Skip the family history, Char. A man’s entitled to a few harmless secrets. And we’re leaving today, not tomorrow.” He gestures to his niece. “Evie, come stand by me.”

“Aye, aye.” She snaps a salute.

The way Evie sizes up Ted grates on me like fingernails on chalkboards. Like he’s good enough to eat—but he’s not on her menu. Maybe Ted *should* come with us instead of staying here with this boy-crazy girl.

But I still sputter, “Ted, I don’t think we need—”

“Then, don’t think.” Smitty scowls. “Seriously, girl, it’s hard enough I can’t come. Do you want me worried the whole time? Because that’s what I’d do. Give my heart ease and take Ted. Char can pilot, but Ted’s the best mechanic I know and a good all-around man besides.” He winks.

Ted flushes. “Thanks. I’ll ask you next time I need a job reference.”

“Any time. It’s all true.”

I don’t quit. “Smitty, it’s not necessary—”

“Annie, do me a favor.” Smitty folds his arms across his chest, looking like Popeye ready to deck Bluto—and win. “Evie will stay and help me, though that’s a waste of manpower. My doctor doesn’t understand seamen. We thrive on challenges. So, I want you to have help, too.”

“It is smart, Annie.” Char waggles her eyebrows almost like Smitty. Maybe it’s a family trait. “It’s a good trade-off. Ted goes

with us to give Smitty peace. Evie helps Smitty, so we know he's fine."

The concern on Smitty's face ends my argument.

"Well, when you put it like that ..."

"I'll keep Smitty out of mischief," Evie promises, "and make him eat healthy."

Smitty snorts. "If you mean salt-free flavorless stuff, we have a problem."

"I have brains." Evie smiles.

She is taller and willowier than me. Her short blonde hair curls from the river's humidity.

"I'll come with you another time and help Uncle Horatio now."

"Uncle who?" I gasp.

"Never mind." Smitty turns crimson. "Ted, stow your gear. It's time to lift anchor."

Smitty slips something small and black into Ted's hand as he steps past. It bothers me that I don't see what. I like being the one with secrets. Pastor Bob and Sue return.

"Ah, here you are." Smitty helps Sue cross the gangplank and claps Bob's shoulder. "Pray a blessing on the launch."

Seeing this sweet group, I choke on the lump in my throat.

Bob pulls a worn leather Bible from his pocket, thumbs through its onionskin pages, and squints at the fine print. "These verses from Isaiah 43 fit, "Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee ...' May He bring you all the way to the ocean and back safely. Amen." He closes his Bible and slips it back in his pocket.

"Where do you want this box of cookies?" Sue points to the delicious-smelling shoebox at her feet.

"I'll keep it safe." With a teasing grin, Ted grabs it by its

strings and disappears down the galley stairs. His voice drifts up, singing, “Anchors Aweigh, my boys, Anchors Aweigh ...”

“I love hearing him happy,” Sue says, her eyes filling. “He’s been heavy-hearted since Josh ... Since ... Ted needs a little fun.”

I quirk an eyebrow. “Fun?”

“Sure. Good times help,” she says.

Char’s face looks serious.

“Before we get underway, Can I take just a minute to see the engine? Each one’s different and I want to do my job well.”

“Sure. Hold on folks. Ted’s an expert at servicing it so it’s in good shape.”

We hurry down the backstairs to the engine room.

Her hands do a vital one-two-three engine check.

She knows her stuff.

“Great. Just like ours. No surprises. I hate learning new things under pressure—glad I won’t have to.”

“Me, too. I’m still reeling from this morning’s failure.

She wipes greasy hands on her coveralls.

“Thanks. Now I’m ready.”

“Then we both are.”

We rush upstairs, smiles on our faces.

“Everything’s fine. She says we’re good to go.”

“Good to hear.” Smitty salutes me and then Char. “I’ll cast off lines if you’re ready, Annie.”

My eyebrows knit. “Can you lift that heavy anchor?”

He rears back. “I should say so, and it’s not that heavy. The winch does the work, not me. But you should blow the whistle to get underway. You’ve waited a long time.”

I flash my gratitude. “I’m looking forward to that.”

“I’ve asked God to help you every minute.” He places a fatherly kiss on my brow. “It’s hard on your folks not being here, but they’re doing what they must. I’ll call them tonight.”

“Uh, skip the part about me failing the pilot exam, okay.”

“Roger that.”

“Picture time,” Sue calls, waving a Kodak Brownie almost like mine. “Don’t lift anchor until we get a parting shot. Gather close, please.”

“Wait,” Evie says. I’ll take it so you can all squeeze in. “Looks good. Ready? One, two, three!” She presses the button several times before we break pose to hug again.

“Thanks so much, everyone.” My voice drops to a whisper. “I couldn’t do this without you.”

“Remember that,” Smitty says, his voice gruff as he goes to the winch.

Bob and Sue step to the wharf as I assume my best professional tone. “Ted, please check oil pressure gauges.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He hustles to the engine room. “Everything’s shipshape,” he calls from below deck.

“Smitty, lift anchor.”

“Aye, aye.” The heavy chain rattles as it spools around its windlass. Once the anchor is raised, Smitty salutes again and leaves the boat.

Char stands at the helm, like the figurehead of a ship, feet planted, hands steady, eyes looking confidently ahead.

This moment is branded in my mind forever. Behind us, to the east, Mt. Hood is still a brilliant sentinel above the Columbia. To the west, an inviting blue-green river road unspools all the way to the Pacific. “Leaving port.”

Char snaps off a regulation Navy salute as our engine thrums to life.

“Reverse engines!” I call. “*Books Afloat* now leaving for points west.” We back from our berth until a widening expanse of blue water separates the boat and wharf. Our gleaming white hull turns like a majestic swan gliding onto a fairly smooth pond, breasting low waves, eager to be underway to the ocean to fulfill the Governor’s Challenge.

Smitty cups a hand to his mouth, “Radio me every night.”

“You, too.” I blink back tears, wishing he could come.



“We’ll pray,” Bob and Sue call, standing with their arms around each other’s waists.

The rippling current beckons. This isn’t how I’d hoped our voyage would start, with someone else at the helm, but we’re underway. The engine rumbles, sending propeller wash in V-shaped waves to both sides of this mighty river. Several tug boats and barges share the channel, but no heavy traffic. Things could be worse.

“Departure at thirteen hundred hours, steady as she goes.” I enter that in our log.

“Thirteen hundred hours, steady as she goes,” Char echoes, her mouth curved in a pumpkin smile.

“God speed,” Smitty calls.

“God speed,” Ted echoes.

Ten minutes later, Char lifts an eyebrow. “Do you have anything to drink? I got thirsty rushing here, and we couldn’t take time to stop.”

“Of course, what would you like?”

“Anything wet, water, tea—Coke if you have it.”

“I have Royal Crown Cola. Will that do?”

“Absolutely.”

I swing onto the stairs to get Char’s drink.

Ted dashes up the same steps from the galley. “I wonder how Sue bakes with sugar rationing—” He ducks to avoid me.

Except we swerve the same direction, and our mouths collide so hard I see stars.

“Yow!” Ted’s hand grazes my shoulder in a near caress before he pulls back to finger his swelling lip.

I jump away, heart thundering. “I did *not* see you.”

“Obviously.” A sappy smile rules his face.

“But you’re okay?”

“Terrific. You got my attention.”

He locks his now deep green eyes on mine. And they

suddenly look as mysterious and worth exploring as the craters of the moon.

“I wasn’t trying to get your attention.” I pass a hand over my lips—they’re fine but burn.

“Let’s see,” he counts the fingers on one hand. “You crashed into me skiing at Mt. Hood on the bunny slope when we were learning. We piled up at the youth roller skating party, and I cushioned you.” His eyes dance. “When you want my attention, just ask.”

I swat him. “You’re keeping track? Don’t be silly. Just focus on the boat.”

Blood rushes to my head, and I push past him to the far side of the boat, taking a time-out while still feeling the tingles warming my lips. His upper lip actually swells. Today’s pressures have gotten to me. Nothing makes sense—least of all, an accidental kiss with a friend.

Thankfully, Ted stays on the other end of the boat, doing maintenance. When I regain composure, I go to the galley to bring Char the Royal Crown.

“This is delicious.” She swallows half without stopping.

We stand, side by side, gazing downriver.

“I’m thankful to be underway.”

“I’m sorry the testing officer was hard on you. He tested me, too, but was nicer then. He’ll come around—just not this time.” She drains more of the bottle, moisture beading the glass, and smacks her lips. “Thanks. That wets my whistle fine.”

“You’re welcome. There’s a small icebox below.” My words rush out so Char won’t discuss the accidental collision kiss that she saw.

Because that’s what it was—pure accident. Totally humiliating, Ted’s lip actually swelling. What must he think? Even when he stops teasing, his eyes dance. And melt me ...

Char lifts the bottle to her mouth a final time and finishes

the last swallows greedily. “Every bit as good as Coke. Maybe better, but don’t spoil me.”

“I will if I can. I want our trip to be pleasant.”

“I’d say you’re off to a good start.” Char glances Ted’s way and winks.

He’s at the boat’s stern, coiling loose ropes around the deck’s steel cleats. He again touches his lip and smiles before pushing the winch’s movable arm out of the way for safety. Besides being a skilled mechanic, he has boat sense.

I may die before admitting it, but it’s good having him onboard, although it would be nice to have Josh, too, all three Musketeers together again like in high school. If only someone knew where Josh is— I remind myself that God does. I stay at the prow. Ted joins me after completing tasks near the stern.

“A penny for your thoughts.”

“I’ve run out.” I smile weakly.

“Not true, you’re always thinking.”

“Then they’re worth more than a penny—maybe a dollar each.”

“And worth it. I’ll pay.” He opens his worn wallet and riffles through, removing two one-dollar bills before I push his hand away.

“Don’t you dare take me seriously. You know better than that. My thoughts are free, probably more than you’ll ever want. But irritate me, and I’ll bury you alive in them.”

“Promise?” Grinning, he returns his wallet to his pocket.

“I need to focus on the boat.”

“Who’s stopping you? You ran into me, remember?” He chuckles. “Or is it Leap Year, and I don’t know it?”

“Stop!” My elbows drop to my hips. “I appreciate your help but leave me alone.” I rush to the top deck. Too much has happened today. And now my comfortable friendship with Ted is changing.

I shake my head, wanting the river breeze to clear my mind.

He almost hugged me. Am I imagining how I felt? Have I read too many romance novels and seen *Gone with the Wind* once too often? I have a boat to run and library stops this very afternoon. And war reports to gather and send without others noticing. I brush water from my eyes with the back of my hand. Why is life *so* complicated?

This morning's crisis took its toll. Even the river's surging current looks calmer than my churning insides. *God, don't let pressure turn me into some crazy girl I hate. Help me do what I have to and do it well.*