



*Friday, June 19, 1942*

*Port of Vancouver, Washington, River Mile 106*

“**W**hat?” Smitty climbs on board, puffing short breaths, hands fisting his hips.

My heart stutters. “I failed. I knew better than to do what he said, but I didn’t use good judgment. You saw what happened.”

“Tarnation! He’s letting personal issues affect his job.”

“What do you mean?”

“His wife left him last month. I’ve heard he dislikes all women now.”

I can’t hold back tears. “He tricked me, so I ran aground. I thought I had to follow his instructions.”

“It’s okay, Annie girl.” Smitty slides his arm around my shoulder.

“When can you retest?” Ted jams his hands into his pockets.

“Thirty days.”

“That’s crazy.” His jaw tightens. “Did you tell him about the Governor’s Challenge?”

“I did, but he doesn’t care.” I heave a sigh. “Thank God,

Smitty can navigate. I'll swallow my pride and just stick to library duties so he and Evie—"

"Annie, there's something I have to tell you." Smitty rubs his stubbly chin. "I waited until after your test, but my ticker's been acting up. Doc says I flunked last week's step test. He won't renew my captain papers until that improves, so I'm grounded. I've sent word to my pilot sister-in-law, Charlotte, to come take my place."

I stagger at his words. "Your heart? How bad is it?"

"Not awful. Just bad enough I can't come this time. And Doc says I can't be alone, so Evie has to stay with me.

This arrangement isn't what I planned, but I'll manage somehow. The two of us can run *Books Afloat*. I crane my neck and stare up the road. "When do you think she and Evie can get here?"

"I'm not sure. I expected them before now." He tugs an ear. He only does that when he's worried.

"*You don't know?*"

"Not exactly. Evie's trying to contact her, but she's on a boat somewhere. So far, she can't reach her."

"I *have* to make this trip. Even if I have to hire a river pilot I can't afford, or *Books Afloat* won't float. I can't fail Governor Langlie." *Or my country.*

Smitty and I lock eyes. The governor shared his river surveillance program with me in strict confidence. The fewer who know, the better. I won't tell Ted.

"I'll let the church know," Ted says, face taut. "We'll start the prayer chain,"

Smitty pulls me into a hug. "Annie, calm down. It's going to be all right."

I stiffen, face burning. "I hate that you're sick, but if I can't meet the Governor's Challenge, it's a disaster. We have to find Charlotte, or I'm sunk. Everything's at stake." I pull away. "I doubt even God can get us a pilot in time."

“You don’t know that, Annie,” Smitty says. “I’ve issued an All-Points Bulletin—police and military radios, Coast Guard ship to shore—the works. Plus, we’re praying.”

I jut my jaw. “Why didn’t the testing officer pass me?”

“Who knows?” Ted’s brows pinch. “Maybe he hurts so bad from losing his wife, he feels like a dead dog who wants others miserable, too.”

“That’s not very nice.” I take a ragged breath. Sometimes Ted’s kind-heartedness frustrates me. Our pastor calls it strength. Today, it makes me mad.

“Here’s the plan.” Smitty crosses his arms. “Either God’s in charge, or He’s not. We’ll finish getting the boat ready and pray. I believe God wants you to launch today, so we’ll see what He does. Like Moses at the Red Sea.”

“Or Annie on the Columbia. I like it.” Ted laughs and checks his watch. “It’s 10:25 a.m. You’re determined to leave at noon? That gives God an hour and a half.”

“Thanks.” I manage a half-grin. God has a way of stretching people beyond their strength before He answers. To build spiritual muscles, our pastor says. “I have some things to complete, Smitty. If we can find any river pilot, we’re set.”

“There’s a ship at the grain elevators. I’ll stroll over there to see what they know.”

My stomach spasms. “Should you do that? I mean, should Ted drive you?”

His face darkens. “I’m not dying—I just have to slow down. Exercise is smart.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Trust me.” He squints at the sun and tilts his skipper’s hat. “We’ll meet here for a noon launch.”

I snap off a salute. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

Ted surprises me with a quick hug.

“I’ll tell Josh’s parents to get prayers going.” He jogs toward

the red brick church on Columbia Street and the parsonage next door.

I check the propeller and find one bent shaft but no permanent damage. I sigh relief and unroll the navigation chart I'll need later. And re-read the weather report—fair skies through tomorrow.

“Lord, we have to get underway. Please help. And help me believe.”

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TED HALF RAN, half walked up the hill, passing Smitty's Dodge coupe holding his duffle bag on the way. He couldn't believe the testing officer failed Anne. If there was a way to help her situation, he'd find it.

He'd never met a girl like Anne before—so much power wrapped in one cute package, with serious brown eyes that bored straight through a guy but made him laugh. And her upturned nose sprinkled with freckles that she tried bleaching one day in chemistry class. Her feistiness was what he and Josh liked most when she entered Vancouver High. She had more Okie accent then—except if she got mad—like today.

When he'd teased her and called her *prickly Anne Nettles*, she'd shoved him down and said, 'I'm Anne Mettles. Two classmates in Oklahoma called me Anne Meddles—and barely lived. Count yourself lucky.'

He laughed at that memory and kicked into high gear, taking the porch steps to the parsonage two at a time. He gave the door two quick raps while twisting the knob and entering. The tantalizing scent of sugar and cinnamon wrapped around him.

“Pastor? Sue?”

“In here.” Sue Vengeance poked her head out of the kitchen.

“Anne failed her exam, so she needs a pilot, and Smitty's doctor grounded him because of a heart flareup, and we can't

find his sister-in-law.” He blurted it in a rush and finally took a breath. “We need the prayer chain fast.”

Sue hurried toward him in her flour-dusted apron and greeted him with a one-armed hug. Her free hand held a plate of cookies.

“Slow down.” She offered him one. “That is a lot going on, but you might pass out stringing that many words together in one breath. Smitty’s sister-in-law has pilot papers, right?”

“Right.”

“Then we can pray but don’t need the prayer chain.”

“Why is that?” He rocked back on his heels.

“Bob’s been working on a solution since last night when Smitty told us about his heart and that the testing officer might be tough. Bob’s friend in Astoria traced Charlotte to a fish cannery. She mostly works along the coast, but he thinks she’ll help out on the river. He left early this morning to find her and bring her and Evie to meet Bob halfway. They should be here soon.”

Ted gave a low whistle. “Great, but that’s ninety miles. Can they arrive in time? And how did Bob get enough gas rations?”

“We’re covered. We had our eight gallons for this week, and Grandma Foley across the alley gives us her four since her car’s on wooden blocks.”

“Terrific. Anne’s been frantic.” He brushed away crumbs and reached for a second cookie when she offered the plate again. “These are delicious.”

“Take the rest to Anne.” She slid the cookies into a bag.

A photo of Josh caught his eye. “Any more news about Midway?”

Her smile fled. “No. And waiting is hard. Thank God only the *Yorktown* sank, and they still don’t have a full list of those missing. I guess it’s a miracle more men weren’t lost.”

Ted nodded.

“If Josh is gone, Bob and I think we’d know, that we’d feel it inside, but we don’t.”

Ted’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “He’s the finest guy I know.”

“Thanks. He feels that way about you, too.” She set down the bag and empty plate and gave Ted a tight hug.

“I love you guys.” He stepped back and opened the door heading for the steps.

“One last question,” Sue called. “Will that boat leave without a man on board?”

He grinned over his shoulder. “Not if I can help it.”

With Smitty unable to go, it was not a good situation. Even if his sister-in-law Charlotte arrived on time, the two most-capable women in the world shouldn’t make this trip alone. Especially on a river where the governor suspected possible Japanese activity. It wasn’t clear if Anne knew that part yet or not. He didn’t want Annie worried if she didn’t. And he sure wouldn’t tell her. He was just watching out for her.

When it looked like it would be just Smitty and Anne on the boat, Smitty had invited Evie for appearance’s sake. Now with roles changed, there should still be three onboard, not two, whether Annie liked it or not. Ted set his jaw. No matter how much she refused and how hard it was to oppose her, Annie wouldn’t get her way this time. He and Smitty had talked. His packed duffle was in the trunk of Smitty’s car.

Annie Mettles was in for a surprise.