

A joy of reading (and writing) historical fiction is how much we learn about times gone by while being cocooned in a compelling story. I wonder if Terri Wangard found a time machine that dropped her on the eastern shores of Brazil during World War II. If an invisibility cloak allowed her to fly with the pilots who made the supply runs from the Natal base to Ascension Island. The choice of a rarely-used setting for a WWII novel and the realism provided by historic details gives Ms. Wangard's characters—a Brazilian and an American whose German families were affected by the events of WWI—an amazing stage on which to find love in the midst of intrigue. I truly enjoyed and highly recommend this story.

— Johnnie Alexander, best-selling, award-winning author of *Where Treasure Hides* and *The Cryptographer's Dilemma*

Unsung Stories of World War II - Book One

SEASHELLS
IN MY
POCKET

TERRI WANGARD



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*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will
fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they
comfort me.*

~ Psalm 23: 4

Chapter One



Recife, Brazil

1942

Mollusks possessed such incredible artistic ability. Amazing that soft, slimy creatures could secrete the right elements to create such intricate, tough beauty as this.

Isabel Neumann twirled the seashell between her finger and thumb, examining it in a shaft of sunlight. Streaks of blue circled the shell, unlike any coloring she'd seen in an *anachis*. A tiny hole marred its perfection, no doubt why the dove snail inhabitant had abandoned its home.

She considered her design and positioned the shell. No. Maybe a dried daisy amid the circle of pink striated scallop seashells? No again. No flowers for this design either. Maybe not even seashells.

Her customer for this commission, with a rough-and-tumble family of four boys, would want a grittier montage.

Terri Wangard

Isabel cleared her workspace and rummaged in her box of beach debris. Lots of driftwood and cork. Even an oar lock.

Dozens of broken sand dollars. She fingered a large piece as an idea percolated. “What do you think, Mamãe? I could design a little shop with a sign that reads *Sand Dollar Repair*. A little corn husk figure could patch pieces together. Wouldn’t that be appealing?”

Mamãe looked up from her mending and smiled. “Sounds very whimsical, and I think you should create that. But would Mrs. Santos appreciate a charming scene like that?”

“No, she would not. She wants an assortment of shore flotsam like I made for Mrs. Gama.” Isabel picked up the oar lock and turned it around and around, her thumb rubbing the rusted shaft. “I know. Everything will represent a fisherman’s shipwreck.”

Several long pieces of driftwood would serve as shelves or dividers within the three-by-two-foot frame. She positioned the lock, an old bottle, a small block and tackle, and a ratty old fishing lure.

The collage needed seashells for a touch of prettiness. She added a long spiraling *coronium elegans* rock snail shell and a deep orange *conasprella*, another sea snail shell, from a mollusk in the cone snail family. Maybe she’d even spare a sand dollar or two. And a crab’s pincer.

What a blessing that people paid her to create artwork from the treasures she found washed up on the beach. Working with shells held far more interest for Isabel than her job at the dry goods store. She loved walking along the shore, listening to the surf, watching sandpipers chase the waves, feeling the surf wash over her toes. Seashells were her preferred finds, and several local homes displayed her delicate shell and pressed flower designs.

So what if her twin brother Marcos referred to her scavenging as cleaning up the beach?

“Time for some coffee.” Mamãe rose from the sofa, laying aside her work. She studied Isabel’s layout and nodded. “Mrs. Santos will be pleased. What about this tiny pair of sandals? They could dangle from fishing line.”

“Ooh, good idea.” Isabel grabbed some line and threaded it through the straps. A noise from outside distracted her. She leaned back from her worktable to peer through the living room window. *Oh, no.* “Marcos is home with that friend of his.”

At first glance, Uwe Schneider was handsome, with wavy white-blond hair and chiseled features. His cold gray eyes, however, lacked a speck of warmth. His utterances all took the tone of demands, and he expected everyone to jump to do his bidding. Especially Isabel. She suppressed a shudder. Why did he act like he owned her?

Mamãe smiled. “I’m glad Marcos found a good friend. He’s seemed so restless since returning from Germany.”

“Good friend?” Isabel sputtered. They never should have sent Marcos to Germany for university. Not while the Nazis were in control. “I’m sure he intends to corrupt Marcos. Why would a young man of military age be allowed to leave Germany unless he’s a spy or a”—her voice dropped to a whisper—“a saboteur.”

“Darling, you have such an imagination. He’s a sweet boy.” Mamãe laughed, patting Isabel’s shoulder. “I’ll put the coffee on.”

They hadn’t realized in 1937 the true state of affairs when Papai’s sister invited Marcos to stay with her family in Heidelberg. The Germans tried to draft him into their army a year later, and the family barely got him out of the country. Once home, he’d confided the Germans let him go because they wanted him to send information about Brazil. They

Terri Wangard

wanted him to spy. Now Uwe had followed him across the Atlantic to work on him. Isabel was sure of that.

The men entered the room as Mamãe returned with the refreshments.

“*Guten tag, Frau Neumann. Wie geht es Ihnen?*” Isabel suppressed a *hmpfh* at Uwe’s obvious ingratiating crooning.

Even worse was Mamãe’s simpering, “I’m fine, Uwe. So nice to see you.”

Isabel refused to look up from her work.

“*Guten tag, Isabel.*” Uwe planted himself at her side, his hand sliding onto her shoulder.

A long moment passed as she dropped her shoulder and leaned away from him.

“*Olá.*” She kept her voice flat.

Uwe’s hand clenched, pinching her. “You will speak to me in German.”

“This is Brazil. We speak Portuguese.” She still didn’t look at him.

“You will show me respect.” He grabbed her arm and yanked her up toward him.

Her leg hit the table hard enough to leave a bruise. The jarring caused several pieces of her artwork to slide out of place. Some fell to the floor. A perfect sand dollar shattered into five pieces.

“My design.” She wrenched free of his grip.

“Hey, take it easy.” At least her brother made an effort to defend her.

“Uwe, leave her be.” Mamãe tried to step between them.

“Don’t tell me what to do, frau.” Uwe shoved Mamãe out of the way.

Marcos leaped forward and caught Mamãe before she fell.

Papai appeared in the doorway, his eyes ablaze. “Leave our home, *Herr Schneider*. You no longer are welcome here.”

Isabel hadn't realized Papai had come in. Last she knew, he'd been helping their neighbor construct a stone patio overlooking the beach. He must have seen Uwe arrive with Marcos and suspected trouble. At least he believed Uwe was a Nazi spy sent to bend Marcos to do his will. Isabel had heard Papai and Marcos argue more than once about Uwe's merits.

Now Uwe's chest heaved like he would fight Papai until, eyes scowling, he spun around. "Come on, Marcos."

Marcos hesitated, glancing at both parents, before following him out.

Mamãe stood wide-eyed, a hand at her throat. Maybe now her image of Uwe as a sweet boy had changed.

Isabel fled to her room. Sounds of a heated disagreement in the drive floated through the open window.

"Will you just forget about her?" Exasperation rang in Marcos's voice.

"She will come around."

"You do realize she doesn't like you."

"Doesn't matter. I will make her mine." Uwe's arrogance repulsed her, but then his words registered.

No, no, no. Isabel twisted a lock of hair round and round her finger. Here in Brazil, they'd heard the Nazis were bullies, and Uwe certainly lived up to the rumor. She agreed with Papai that he must be a spy and wanted to entangle Marcos in his misdeeds, but why did he fixate on her?

Grabbing her Bible from the bedside table, she pulled out the postcards of Cypress Gardens tucked within the cover. Her cousin Huberto had sent them from the United States.

She recalled the day he'd shown up at their door. They had still lived in Florianópolis then, in southern Brazil.

Huberto had been a sailor in the German navy and escaped when his ship limped into port in Montevideo. He detested the Nazis and what they were doing to Germany, and he resolved

Terri Wangard

to thwart their evil purposes. Papai paid his way to America, where he now worked for U.S. military intelligence. He'd sent these postcards to inform them of his safe arrival.

Isabel studied the cards. Cypress Gardens looked beautiful. Lots of lush, colorful flowers. Pretty girls wearing bathing suits, sitting in small boats. Moss hanging from trees. A gazebo overlooking a lagoon. How she wished she could join him there.

Marcos appeared in her doorway, leaning against the frame. "German women are proud to serve the Reich in every way they can. A woman's most joyous task is to care for her family." His mouth twisted. "Uwe believes Papai totally failed in bringing you up properly. He is determined to bring you to heel and train you into his perfect wife."

Isabel shuddered. "Never. I absolutely will not marry such an arrogant creep." She dropped the postcards on the table before she ended up wrinkling them. "And why would I serve the Reich? I've never been there. I'm Brazilian, not German."

"Doesn't matter. In the Germans' eyes, you are a German because of your heritage." He knocked twice on the doorframe. "The Nazis' arrogance makes them confident bullies who don't hesitate to demand their way. They have the German people intimidated into looking the other way from their nasty deeds. Uwe expects you to behave the same way. Don't ever let him catch you alone."

Marcos sauntered down the hall and Isabel stared out the window. Palm fronds swayed in the ocean breeze. Close by, a bird sang a cheerful tune, and in the background, waves crashed onto the shore. She sighed. Her joy in the day had been tarnished.

True, southern Brazil was filled with Germans. Mamãe's family had immigrated after the 1848 revolutions in Germany had failed. Papai, a pilot in the Great War, left Germany in 1919.

He promptly met and married Mamãe. A year later, Isabel and Marcos joined them.

Life in Florianópolis had been idyllic, and Papai said it was like living in Germany. Hundreds of thousands of Germans had settled here. Maybe even a million. She and Marcos attended German schools, their minister came from Germany, buildings boasted German architecture, and everyone spoke German. Mamãe told them there'd been tension and a few incidents during the Great War twenty-five years ago, but their good life continued.

And now another war, much worse. The Brazilian government prohibited the German language. German pilots in Brazil lost their jobs with German or Italian airlines. Papai wisely remained independent, operating his own air cargo business with three planes. They'd moved to Recife to avoid the German enclave.

They lived in a beachfront house where she could indulge her passion for collecting seashells. She'd made a few friends. Anyone would say they'd assimilated with their Brazilian neighbors.

But she didn't feel at home here. She didn't want to return to the German community in Florianópolis either. What did she want?

She fingered the postcards. Of course, Huberto wasn't in Cypress Gardens anymore. He lived in Washington, D.C. She'd seen pictures of monuments surrounded by cherry blossoms. She'd like to see that too. Unfortunately, she didn't have any intelligence to share with the Americans.

She sat up straight as an idea struck her. Maybe she could still work for them.

The Americans were building an air base in Natal as part of their South Atlantic ferry route. Natal had been chosen because it stood on the tip of Brazil's bulge into the Atlantic, the closest

Terri Wangard

point to Africa. Maybe she could get a job at Parnamirim Field. Did they hire Brazilian civilians? According to the news, hundreds of Brazilians had been hired to construct the base, but surely they'd still need local help for their operations.

Mamãe and Papai wouldn't like her going so far from home. Not one little bit. But she was twenty-two years old. Time to be on her own. Natal lay over one hundred fifty miles north, and the roads were horrible. But Papai could fly her there in his airplane. Perfect. No reason in the world why her fantasy couldn't come true.