

Chapter Three



Isabel grinned all the way outside to the picnic table set up in the afternoon shade of the office building. She glanced skyward at the rumble of an airplane winging overhead. Four engines, twin tail fins. Her grin widened. A B-24 bomber, probably the navy's. She'd quickly acquired the skill of aircraft recognition.

Sandra Pennock, one of her housemates, watched with narrowed eyes. "You look like the cat that lapped up all the cream."

Isabel laughed. "I just ran into a gorgeous pilot. He has thick brown hair and light brown eyes that probably turn green in the sun. And he's this tall." She held her hand six inches over her head. "We needed to pass each other in the hallway, but we kept moving in the same direction. So he took my hands and danced me around so I was clear to go my way and he his way."

"Uh-huh." The willowy brunette drummed her fingers on the table. "What's his name?"

Isabel plopped down on the wooden bench seat and

nibbled her lip. Sandra doused her giddiness the way an ocean roller sucked the prettiest shells back into the deep before she could snatch them up. How could she have forgotten Sandra's propensity for one-upmanship?

"I don't know, except it ends with a t."

Sandra's laughter rang out. "That narrows down the possibilities among the thousands of men passing through Parnamirim each day. You say he's a pilot?"

"He wore wings. And he has a deep voice. He's probably asked to read the Scriptures at church, but everyone concentrates on his tone, not the words, so they totally miss the meaning."

"I'll have to watch for him." Sandra laughed again. "Are all the girls swooning, like you're doing now?"

Isabel straightened. "I'm not swooning. Isn't that like fainting?"

Shaking her head, Sandra pushed a flyer across the table. "Do you know where this leather shop is? My mother heard about the Natal cowboy boots and she wants me to send a pair for my brother."

"Sure, it's not far off the Bonde route, near the Grande Hotel. Do you want me to go with you?"

Sandra set her jaw. "No, thanks. I think we've gone about in the town often enough that I can manage the trolley on my own." She thumped her fist on the table. "I am a woman on a mission. I will succeed." She slouched. "I hope. Here I do fine, but out there, I feel like a foreigner."

"I wonder why." Isabel traced circles on the flyer. "There are sure to be lots of servicemen around who can help you."

"They don't speak Portuguese, which is where I would need help."

"Oh, there he is." Isabel's gaze riveted to the office. "He just came out with Captain Carter."

Lloyd Carter served as the weight and balance officer in charge of loading cargo onto the planes. He was also Isabel's boss. She had never seen anyone so covered with freckles, and he wasn't even a redhead. Right now, he had a full head of steam.

"I can't get it through his thick skull that packing a plane with wounded just won't do. His line is that ambulatory patients would appreciate the chance to stand up and stretch, but he's ignoring the fact that planes experience turbulence. Toppling over isn't going to do the wounded any good. Hello, ladies." Lloyd switched gears faster than anyone she'd ever met.

"Is someone not valuing your learned opinion on how to stuff airplanes?" Sandra's patronizing comment caused the handsome pilot's eyes to balloon, but Isabel, used to her needling, offered the man a minute shrug.

The captain's mouth quirked, but he got right back into his soliloquy. "When fuel is consumed and the cargo's weight needs to be redistributed, you want to shove around inanimate objects, not broken bodies."

He turned to the pilot without missing a beat. "Have you met Sandra Pennock and Isabel Neumann? Sandra gets her kicks by pretending I know nothing about my job. And Isabel makes my job easier by calculating load distribution. She's a genius." He waved at the pilot when he addressed the women. "Lieutenant Daniel Lambert here flies C-47s to Ascension Island and back."

Daniel Lambert. A tingle zipped through Isabel all the way down to her toes. "You are based here in Natal?"

His brows jerked upward. "Yes, I am."

She understood his surprise. Her accent gave her away. All the Americans she met were astonished to find a foreigner in such an important position. Native civilians worked in the

mess hall or on the janitorial staff. She had started in the mess hall, wiping tables, until she glanced at a load chart beside the captain's plate and pointed out a mathematical error. Next thing she knew, he'd transferred her to his staff.

She worked six days a week in the office or on the tarmac, overseeing the loading of the airplanes. On her first day in his office, Captain Carter had shown her a film about loading. If too much weight was placed forward, the plane could nosedive. Too much weight in the rear caused the nose to pull up, and the airplane stalled and fell to earth. If the cargo shifted in-flight, same results. Or if the cargo wasn't shifted as the fuel load burned off, the plane would unbalance.

Correctly loading an aircraft didn't require a genius, just a bit of mathematical prowess. Calculating a load was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle.

"Isabel here swallowed a calculator. Rattle off any equation, and she'll give you the answer like that." Carter snapped his fingers.

Daniel crossed his arms and gazed skyward for a moment. "Twelve plus three minus one times two."

"Twenty-eight." Isabel's cheeks heated when he winked at her instant response.

He grinned at her boss. "She is good."

"Even I knew that one." Sandra tended to pout if left out of a conversation for long.

"And what do you do?" Daniel's question was polite, but his eyes didn't gleam with the humor he'd offered Isabel.

"I work with the U.S. Engineering Department."

"Ah. A USED girl."

Sandra raised a hand. "No jokes, please. I've heard them all."

A closed-lipped smile stretched across his face, but it appeared forced. He shifted his gaze between Lloyd and Isabel.

“Has a general asked to have his personal refrigerator shipped to Africa?”

Lloyd shook his head, but Isabel nodded. “A cute little red Frigidaire? Yes, someone was trying to get it onboard an eastbound plane.”

She would have loved to have that refrigerator. The ancient unit at home wheezed like an old man. Just yesterday, her roommate Graziela had used a chisel to remove ice built up in the freezer. Even milk in the refrigerator section rattled with ice. The diminutive contraband Frigidaire couldn’t hold as much, but it had to be more efficient.

“Was trying?” Lloyd’s brows bunched up over his nose. “Did anyone take it?”

She nodded. “I saw him pay a pilot.” When Lloyd’s face darkened, she hurried on. “I told the pilot he had a full load already, and the refrigerator weighed fifty pounds according to its crate. He told his crew to remove mail sacks, but I kept watching him.”

The pilot expected to charm her into looking the other way. She’d had a lifetime of experience of watching Marcos wheedle his way out of mischief, however, and now she followed Mamãe’s method of one eyebrow raised and one foot tapping.

“I heard about that.” Sandra jumped in. “Isabel said, ‘The soldiers look forward to their mail. You’d rather grease your hands?’” With a peal of condescending laughter, she patted Isabel’s shoulder. “Issy does well with English, but she doesn’t get all the expressions right.”

Daniel’s eyes narrowed at Sandra before returning his attention to Isabel. She straightened and shrugged off Sandra’s outburst. “One of his crewmen understood he’d been paid and refused to remove the mail. Instead, they took off two cases of their own, and the pilot had to share his grease money with them.”

“Good for them.” Daniel paused. “I think. What was in the cases they left behind?”

“Bootleg bourbon, I heard it was.”

“Kentucky bourbon?” Lloyd planted his hands on his hips. “Did they buy it in Puerto Rico, by any chance?”

“Yes. The pilot said something like fifths for a dollar fifty? They claim they can sell them for twenty-five dollars in England.” Isabel’s eyes widened as a storm cloud brewed across Lloyd’s face. “They say bootlegs are an acceptable part of military transportation as long as you’re discreet.”

“Sure, they are. Do you know if this is a crew who comes through here regularly?”

“They were a ferrying crew taking the plane all the way to England.”

Shaking his head, Lloyd turned away, then swung back around. “What happened to the cases left behind?”

“They disappeared very quickly.” Isabel grinned. “And the trash was full of bottles this morning.”

“Serves the bums right. We can’t police every plane from start to take off.” Lloyd’s words lingered in the air as he strode off.

“Ladies.” Daniel nodded to them before heading in the direction of the officers’ barracks.

Isabel stood. “Good luck finding those boots, Sandra. I’m heading home to do some laundry. Tomorrow, I’m going to the beach.”

She bit her lip as Sandra grumbled about the injustice of having to do her mother’s bidding and finding those blasted boots. Relief coursed through Isabel. She would have accompanied Sandra on her errand, but while the woman usually sounded polite, most of her comments belittled Isabel. Besides, finishing chores so she could spend time at the beach was far preferable. Her toes itched to splash in the waves.

She noticed Daniel Lambert didn't appear to be in a hurry to reach his destination. He watched a gull fly overhead. Someone hailed him, and he waved in acknowledgment. A small dog gamboled to him, and he reached down to ruffle its ears.

He was based here. She'd watch for his name on the manifests. They'd meet again. Oh yes. She'd see to that.