

## Chapter Two

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*Ascension Island, South Atlantic*

1943

The very long night was nearly over. Dawn broke and spilled sunlight onto Ascension Island as the cargo plane lined up with the runway and settled gently on the pavement. The small island held dozens of aircraft, many of them belonging to the Air Transport Command. Waging war required a lot of equipment, and it was more difficult when the fighting took place on the opposite side of the world from the United States.

Daniel Lambert eased his C-47 Douglas Skytrain into the designated spot and went through the parking checklist with Reggie Wendt, his co-pilot. “Parking brake.”

“On.”

“Tailwheel.”

“Locked.”

“Fuel selectors.”

“Off.”

Daniel stifled a yawn. He could do this in his sleep, but it wasn't recommended. By the time he reached the pitot cover, which protected the sensors acting as flow meters, he couldn't hold back. His yawn nearly unhinged his jaw. "As soon as we get checked in, I'm going to hibernate."

Reggie nodded to a jeep pulling up to their nose. "First things first. My guess is that the general down there is the guy expecting his fancy fridge."

"Oh, bother."

Trust the problems to crop up immediately upon landing. It made sense, of course. The high brass wanted their luxuries on foreign battlefields and didn't hesitate to commandeer cargo space. Never mind that the men under them desperately needed the weapons and medicine the cargo planes ought to be hauling. And if the big man didn't show up to grab his indulgences right away, someone else might see them and help himself. But why was he here on Ascension? Had he left the African battlefield to escort his refrigerator? Or maybe he was delaying his arrival over there until he had all his luggage in tow. Either way, he didn't seem like the kind of commanding officer Daniel would care to serve under.

Easing out of the cramped cockpit, he snatched up the manifest clipboard. "All right. Time to disappoint the guy."

A truck had been positioned at the tiny forward door. Daniel slid through and jumped into the truck bed, searching for a loadmaster. The base was as busy as Natal. They'd have to wait their turn. Too bad. He'd have to deal with this pompous general on his own.

The man didn't waste words. "Lieutenant, did you come from Brazil? Do you have a special package to be forwarded to Khartoum?"

Daniel held back a snort of derision. Clever of the man to offer a destination in Africa instead of his name. Made it sound

official. He studied his clipboard, knowing he'd refused to allow it on his plane in Natal. *Package*. Like the fridge was something he could have tucked under his seat.

"No, sir. We're full of high priority refrigerated whole blood for transfusions and crates of grenades urgently needed in Africa." He didn't bother to mention the five sacks of mail squeezed into the spot that could have held the fridge.

The general slapped the truck. "This delay is insufferable. It's delaying our departure."

His aide spoke up. "Maybe they can pack the refrigerator with blood so that it pays its way, so to speak."

Daniel kept a poker face with difficulty. Brazen of the aide to admit the general wanted his personal comforts.

The general practiced no restraint. His face mottled with red splotches, and he snapped at the poor man. "Enough, Smythe. See to the jeep before those bozos take it."

He stomped off, and a wave of sighs tickled Daniel's ears. He glanced back to watch his crew wilt in the doorway. A glimpse of the hapless aide prompted a tired smile. "Do you like working for the general?"

The man stiffened. "There are worse jobs."

"Right." Daniel nodded. "Latrine duty." He spun around before he laughed in the guy's face. "Okay, fellas. You know the drill. See that the cargo is claimed. Stay out of trouble. Get some rest. Reggie, it's your show. I have to get some shuteye."

He'd barely closed his eyes in a transient crew tent, it seemed, when Reggie shook him awake. "Rise and shine. Wheels up in sixty minutes."

"What?"

Daniel lay bathed in sweat, the tent was so hot. The flap hadn't been left open to allow a bit of ocean breeze. A cacophony of sound assaulted him—men yelling, machines

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clanking, and engines revving. Through bleary eyes, he spotted the purple sky. “What time is it?”

“It’s 0400.”

“*What?*”

“You slept around the clock, Daniel. Come on, they’re serving something that passes for breakfast. That ought to wake you up.”

Daniel scrubbed his eyes with his palms. “Do we have a load to take back?”

“Yep. Wounded from the North African battlefields.”

“Lovely. They’ll want a smooth flight.” Daniel swayed as he worked himself into a sitting position.

“See you at chow.” Reggie whistled his way out.

A rustling—and was that a faint snicker?—behind him brought his head around. Bill Nelson, his navigator, packed his duffel, a smirk on his face and his uniform appearing freshly ironed. Daniel gritted his teeth. Billy Boy’s superior attitude rankled him, but he couldn’t let on. Nelson would feel empowered. All because he was four years older.

Daniel gathered his gear. “Time for a bath.”

Surprise flashed across Nelson’s face. “Didn’t you hear Wendt? We’re scheduled to take off in an hour.”

“Probably more like fifty-five minutes now.” Stepping out of the tent, Daniel spotted the bathing facility and set off whistling Reggie’s tune. He needed to be clean more than having a full belly to feel human. All his life he’d been sensitive to smells, and right now? He wasn’t daisy fresh, that was for sure. The island was a dry place and water was rationed, but he’d manage with a spit bath.

As the eastern horizon lightened, he made out the cloud-shrouded Green Mountain, the only place where vegetation grew on these thirty-four square miles of British-owned lava rock. Sharp reefs and tidal currents made swimming

dangerous along much of the coast, or he'd take a dip in the surf. Strange, forbidding place here, midway between Africa and South America.

He made it to the plane with ten minutes to spare, his stomach satisfied with powdered eggs, dry toast, and canned peaches. He'd even smuggled out two canteens filled with water, into which he dumped lemonade powder. It wasn't the tastiest, but neither was the water.

Both cargo doors at the rear remained open, allowing a view of the wounded occupying every seat and stretcher. Daniel trotted up the steps and did a quick count. Twelve sat in the uncomfortable sling seats and ten lay on stretchers, plus a little red-haired nurse and a pudgy orderly. As he walked up the narrow sloping aisle, he noted the aircraft appeared well cleaned and the luggage was securely stowed, but then he noticed a loose stretcher bracket.

"Kenny? Bring a screwdriver."

Exuberant crew chief Kenny Wright appeared at Daniel's elbow with the requested tool and tightened the proud screw. "We may have a problem patient." He nodded toward one of the sitting passengers. "That colonel must be a friend of the refrigerator general. He asked where the VIP accommodations are."

Daniel winced. "Great. Just great." He cast another glance around the airplane. "Looks like Nelson's getting the latest weather dope. Are we fueled up?"

"Eight hundred gallons. We're ready to go."

A feathery touch on Daniel's leg gained his attention. He looked down into the pain-glazed eyes of a patient. "How long till we get home?"

Daniel crouched down. "It'll be a few days yet. There are no nonstop flights from Africa to the U.S., so you're hopscotching all over. From here we'll fly to Brazil, then on to Trinidad and

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Miami. Maybe a few more stops. This flight from Ascension to Natal, Brazil, will take nine hours.”

The boy groaned. “I feel like I’m about to slide out of here.” He twitched a shoulder. “But I can stand it. I’m going home. That’s the main thing.”

Daniel patted his shoulder. “We’re at a steep angle now because the nose is so much higher than the tail, but once we’re airborne, we’ll be level.”

He found his way to the nurse, peering at her name badge. “Lieutenant Fromm, I’m Lieutenant Lambert, the pilot.”

“Well, hello.” The sultry voice didn’t match her petite size. “What may I do for you?”

He jerked his gaze from his readiness inspection to her. Did she think she was a stewardess? “Nothing for me.” He pointed with his pen. “That patient seems to be in bad shape.”

“Maybe he could use a shot of morphine.” She gave Daniel a sidelong flirty smile. “I’ll check him out.” The lieutenant sashayed away.

“Zowie. She’s got it bad for you, sir.” Kenny’s eyebrows shimmied like a speeding caterpillar.

“Oh, hush.” All Daniel needed was his crew teasing him about a little gal who was too forward for her own good. He hoped Nelson, standing in front of his station with a sour expression, hadn’t noticed. “Was the weather report full of glad tidings?”

“Same old. Look for a tailwind at nine thousand.”

“All right then.” Daniel touched the shoulder of Hal Busch, his radio operator, a serious young man who rarely smiled. His radios occupied a small space on the right, directly behind the cockpit and across from the navigator. “Call the controller. Tell him we’re ready to go.”

He hadn’t told the pain-ridden patient that he wouldn’t be taking them all the way to the States. Another crew would take

over in Natal, but not right away. First they'd have a rest in the base hospital with a full medical staff caring for them until the next leg of their journey.

For himself, Daniel anticipated a day of lounging on the town's sandy beach.

But first, those nine hours of flying over open ocean. Once they had reached their cruising altitude of ten thousand feet, he fumbled for his sunglasses. They flew ahead of the sun, but its glare bounced off the sparkling ocean.

At the midway point of the monotonous flight, he left the controls in Reggie's capable hands and walked through the cargo hold. The wounded on stretchers appeared to be sleeping, including the boy eager to reach home. Those in the sling seats slumped in uncomfortable repose, except for one man. He sprawled half off the seat, his legs stretched out in the walkway.

Daniel checked his tag. Abdominal surgery less than two weeks ago. He glanced around for the medical staff. They sat in back, the orderly with his chin planted on his chest, the nurse filing her nails. With a huff of exasperation, he strode back and shook the orderly awake. "One of your surgical patients needs to be put back properly in his seat. Come on."

Lieutenant Fromm followed on their heels and didn't stop chattering as the men eased the patient back into a healthier position. "I checked the men just a minute ago and everyone was fine. I don't understand how he could have gotten out of his seat like that."

The colonel beckoned Daniel. "Don't you have a more comfortable chair?"

Seriously? Daniel strove to keep his irritation out of his voice. "No, sir, not on a military aircraft."

The colonel grumbled about the lack of courtesy for a field officer.

Kenny leaned close when Daniel returned to the cockpit. “I bet he wasn’t wounded in combat. He probably broke his ankle when he tripped over a communications cable while trying to save his neck.”

Daniel chuckled under his breath. Maybe he should suggest practicing the courtesy the colonel felt was his due, but he wouldn’t be surprised if Kenny was right.

As the plane approached the Brazilian coast on an unusually cloudy day, a pink cloud rose.

Reggie leaned closer to the windshield. “What’s with the pink fog?”

It didn’t look like fog. Whatever it was, they were about to fly through it. Too late, Daniel recognized it.

“Flamingos.”

Flying at one hundred twenty miles per hour, they were on them in an instant.

Multiple thumps impacted the plane. Two birds struck the windshield. The glass broke and a bird flopped on the copilot’s instruments. Reggie yelled as the engine pitch changed. Daniel scanned his instruments before trying to view the left engine. “Engine one off and feathered.”

“No kidding. There are feathers all over.”

“Shut off the fuel to one and the fuel cross-feed valve.”

“Done.”

Over their headphones, Nelson demanded, “What’s going on?”

Daniel ignored him. “Hal, radio Parnamirim. Tell them we’ve had multiple bird strikes, lost one engine and the other is running ragged. We need to land immediately.”

Nelson muttered something about their carelessness.

Reggie dropped the dead bird on the floor. “Evasive action at this altitude means a crash, Nelson. Would you prefer that?”



They didn't hear another peep out of the navigator, but they did hear Kenny reassuring their passengers. "We're coming into Parnamirim Air Base in Natal, Brazil. A flock of flamingos greeted us by knocking out one engine, but don't you worry. We've got the best pilot in the air force at the controls."

Maybe this would keep the patients from objecting to a stay at the hospital instead of continuing on to Trinidad immediately. Too often, the wounded became upset at the delay. Daniel didn't blame them. He wouldn't care to take the tour of military hospitals around the world either.

He increased the rpm on engine two. "Lower the landing gear and lock the tail wheel, but hold off on the flaps until ... okay, now. Flaps down."

He normally made beautiful three-point landings, but now he opted for the novice's approach and landed on the main wheels. They chirped on contact with the runway and he applied the brakes. Their working engine hiccupped as he turned off the runway, but it powered them to the tarmac.

Not until they had parked the plane did he take a look at Reggie. "Were you injured by glass or bird?"

"My heart did the jitterbug, but no blood was drawn." He looked down at their uninvited guest. "I should look for a taxidermist. This can be our mascot."

"Oh, please." Daniel eased out of his cramped seat and stretched. "As soon as we're disinfected, I'll head over to operations and report our damaged bird."

"Do you mean the airplane or the feathered mess?"

As the Brazilian malaria patrol came aboard with their pyrethrum spray, Daniel contemplated taking the flamingo along as proof. Nope, it could have lice, although the spray might take care of that. It was definitely on the gory side.

One of the health officials came to the cockpit and gaped at

the bird. He raised his gaze to the windshield and frowned. "Broken glass will not seal in the spray."

"I haven't heard any mosquitoes buzz my ears." Reggie grinned before pointing to the carcass. "No telling what hitchhikers this intruder may have brought in, though."

He lifted the flamingo by a leg and the official doused it with spray. He also took extra care spraying the cockpit and them. Daniel kept his hands over his face, leaning toward the broken windshield in hopes of a bit of fresh air. The health team finally left with their usual warning to keep the plane door closed for ten minutes to allow the spray to do its work.

As the time ticked away, Daniel moved back into the cargo hold and called to Kenny. "Would you mind cleaning up the blood in the cockpit? I need to report in about the damage."

Jaws dropped throughout the plane, including the colonel's, and Daniel snickered under his breath. He caught a ride to the operations building and hurried inside. Rounding a corner, he nearly collided with a vision clad in a flamingo pink dress. He stepped aside to his right as she stepped to her left. They both slid the other way.

Grinning, he grabbed her hand. "May I have this dance?" He twirled her around, released her, and bowed. Her cheeks glowed as pink as her dress, although humor sparkled in her eyes.

He wouldn't mind running into her again.