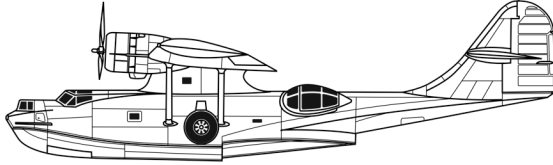


## Chapter Three

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**S**tefan clenched his fists beneath the stiff hospital sheet. He shouldn't be surprised. Dever specialized in half-truths and untruths. He excelled at twisting facts to make his targets appear ridiculous.

Stefan fidgeted in the bed. Why had Dever targeted him? Sure, he never joined the guys for a drink. He had to guard his alone time, for privacy was hard to come by in the military.

After twelve or more hours flying with his crew, he cherished the chance to lose himself in a good book or write to family and friends. Sitting in the officers' club, rehashing the flying and the weather and the dreary food, and stinking like an overflowing ashtray because of all the cigarette smokers held no appeal for him.

He frowned at the arched ceiling. His first week in Iceland, someone had offered him a cigarette. He refused it, explaining he didn't care for the smell of tobacco due to visiting his chain-smoking grandfather's house while growing up. After that, Dever delighted in blowing smoke in his face. He may as well have a bull's-eye painted on his back.

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Stefan longed to walk beyond the base and breathe the fresh, bracing air. Granted, the air often stank of sulfur, a consequence of living on a volcanic island. But that contributed to Iceland's fascination. This was a geologist's jewel box. The lava fields, the barren mountains, the mind-boggling absence of trees. He itched for the chance to explore the geysers, waterfalls, and hot springs existing here in abundance.

"Hey, Frenchie. You came."

A patient's exuberant greeting pulled him from his musing. Surprise rocked Stefan when he realized the man was speaking to her—Dever's victim, Mary. Why did they call her Frenchie?

She grinned at a trio of patients. "I knew you boys wouldn't go to sleep without a bedtime story."

Her smile dazzled his tired eyes. She looked the same yet different, with brown hair somewhere between straight and curly. Maybe an inch above average height. And did she have freckles? Gone was the hysteria that had tinged her voice. She acted at ease with the bedridden sailors. Of course, men confined to bed were unable to attack her.

"How can we go to sleep when the sun is finally shining?"

"We've been in utter darkness without you."

"Only your sweet smile gets us through these wearisome days."

*Oh, brother.* These three could be the Curly, Moe, and Larry of the lovelorn. Stefan chuckled through his foggy thoughts.

Frenchie ignored their foolishness as she perched on Curly's bed and clasped her hands primly in her lap.

"Once upon a time, Goldilocks wandered, lost in a forest, when she discovered a ramshackle cottage. Inside, she found Len working on his stamp collection. The moist, heavy bandages on his hands attracted the stamps like glue, and he became verily frustrated as they all stuck to him."

Moe held up his bandaged hands. “Boy howdy, you better believe it, sweetheart.”

“In the kitchen, Jack wanted to bake cookies, but the casts on his arms made him clumsy indeed, and more flour coated the counter, the floor, and himself than could be found in the bowl.”

“Say you’ll help me make those cookies.” Larry sported casts on both arms and a leg. Stefan didn’t want to think about how he’d gained those injuries.

“Randy attempted to cross the living room but tangled his crutches with a throw rug and fell with a mighty thud. In his frustration, Len snarled, ‘Having a rest?’”

Curly, his leg up in traction, hooted. “Len, she nailed you. Never a lick of sympathy.”

Before their squabbles got out of hand, she rose and patted Curly’s arm. “Nighty-night, boys.”

\* \* \*

Marie rose from Len’s bed with a laugh. They probably wouldn’t appreciate knowing they reminded her of boys she’d grown up with in the orphanage.

A man lay in bed four, his gaze fixed on her. She swallowed a gasp and blinked once, twice. It was him—the man who’d said good evening and then rescinded his greeting when she snarled at him. The man Lettie called the sweetest man in Iceland, whom she’d love to have notice her. Too bad Lettie wasn’t here now. Marie had his full, undivided attention and, judging by the stormy-blue eyes, he was not happy to see her.

Shuffling forward, she raised her chin and straightened her shoulders. She’d made an honest mistake. If he wasn’t man enough to overlook it, that was his problem.

Pausing beside his bed, she fought the urge to flee from his

steady gaze. Her fingers hurt. No wonder, with the way she clenched them. Smoothing her hands down her skirt, she cleared her throat. "I, um." Her voice cracked. Confound it! She tried again. "I owe you an apology."

He quirked his right eyebrow. "Is that so?"

His voice hadn't sounded scratchy before. On closer inspection, she noticed the spiky condition of his short hair that, if longer, would likely curl.

Amusement flared in those mesmerizing blue eyes. Sapphire blue. How had she missed that the other day?

"Why are you sorry?"

She pulled over a chair. No need to entertain the whole hut. "I was rude. Last week." Breathe in, breathe out. "A Lothario had just given me a hard time. But you were being friendly. I realize that now. One of my colleagues told me you're one of the gems." Exhale.

He stared at her for the longest time. He must be wondering why she'd joined the Red Cross if she couldn't handle an overdose of testosterone.

"A gem. Would you put that in writing? My fourth-grade teacher claimed I was part of an unholy trio."

That's all he heard? As one of her college professors would say, *well, alrighty then.*

"A little devil, were you?"

"We were little angels."

"Of the fallen variety?"

He grinned, then laughed. And then he coughed. And coughed. His face turned red, and still he coughed.

Marie scrambled to her feet. What should she do?

A nurse rushed to his side, pulled him upright from his slightly inclined position, and smacked his back. A basin appeared on his lap. "Cough it up. Come on, now. Get under it and cough it out."

After another mighty thump that had to hurt, a dribble of water trickled from his mouth. A doctor pushed Marie away and added some whacks of his own. Stefan convulsed as seawater gushed out. He panted while the doctor pressed a stethoscope to his chest, then his back, and ordered him to breathe deeply.

“Very good. Your lungs are almost clear.” He scribbled on Stefan’s chart and left.

Marie should leave as well. He’d probably prefer privacy rather than an audience to the indignities of hospital affairs. She certainly would. But her feet remained stuck to the floor.

When the nurse left, he eyed her. “Did Dever give you that bruise?”

She stifled a gasp. Lettie chattered too much. “Hmm. What happened to you?”

He smirked but allowed her to change the subject. “I went for an ill-advised swim.”

“Ah. That explains the spiky hairdo.”

He patted his head all over and sighed. “I lost my comb.”

The man in the next bed groaned, and Stefan winced. “The staff hasn’t been by to check on him, and he keeps moaning. Can’t they do something for him?”

“I’ll ask.” He probably wanted her to leave. “And I’ll find you a comb. By the way, I’m Marie Foubert.”

“Marie?” His eyes clouded as he rubbed his chin. “Marie it is. I’m Stefan.”

Odd reaction. She mentally shrugged. Stef-an. Not Steven. Alrighty. She nodded. “Nice to meet you, Stefan.”

\* \* \*

Marie departed hastily, her cheeks burning. After telling a nurse about the groaning burn victim, she slipped back into the

room to leave a comb on the stand by Stefan's bed. Before exiting, she glanced back and found the man's blue gaze on her. She pressed her hands together and laid her head on them, indicating sleep. He grinned but closed his eyes again. He must think her a real ninny. But why should she care?

She marched across the base to the Red Cross barracks. Inside, the Red Cross women were all present. Lettie jabbered away to Helen, who nodded now and then as she read a letter. Marie wiped a grin off her face. Poor Helen. She and Lettie were assigned to an army camp several miles from their base. Daily traversing muddy, bumpy roads often resulted in endless delays, during which Lettie likely subjected Helen to her ceaseless monologues.

Marie joined Betty at their side-by-side cots. Their semi-cylindrical Quonset hut came equipped only with beds, a shelf stuck to the curved dome of the hut above each bed, and a potbellied stove. She stored her purse in the upended packing crate she'd commandeered for use as a bedside bookcase. A soldier had added two shelves and applied a blowtorch to the bare wood, giving it an antique look.

Betty set aside her letter writing. The petite blonde hailed from southern California with a large, happy family and a love for the beach. Despite being opposites in many ways, they'd become good friends. "How are the patients doing?"

"No new gruesome injuries today, but word came that several burn victims are arriving from a torpedoed merchant ship." Marie plopped down on her bed and glanced around. No one seemed to pay them attention. "I met Lettie's 'sweetest man in Iceland.'"

Betty leaned forward. "Is he sweet?"

"Hmpf. He asked if Dever gave me a bruise. It was a bite mark, like a vampire. What must Lettie have said to him?" She covered her face with her hands at the memory of

Dever's touch. "Stefan does have the bluest eyes I've ever seen."

"What are you two whispering about?" Lettie sauntered over. "Have you heard we're having our Monday-morning meeting tomorrow instead? The field director's back from wherever he went. We need some new ideas for programs for the men."

Across the hut, Anne watched them through narrowed eyes. The woman was too outspoken for Marie's liking, claiming personal credit for all the Red Cross women had accomplished, no matter how tenuous the likelihood. The field director ate it up like a cat in cream and admonished the rest of them to carry their weight and not make Anne do all the work.

Betty touched Marie's hand. "Tell Lettie your suggestion and see what she thinks."

"We should see if any musical Icelanders can provide concerts. It might be a way to promote friendly relations between them and us. Of course, piano concerts aren't possible, not with our wheezing, rinky-tink upright."

"Oh, yes." Lettie clasped her hands and nodded. "Maybe a choral group?"

Marie tilted her head. "If they know English-language songs. Icelandic lyrics wouldn't be understood."

"Do share that. It's a great idea."

The following day, all twelve women gathered in a room at base headquarters. The director, Mr. Perry, and his assistant, Mr. Walton, sat at the head of a long table. Both men appeared to be of appropriate age to serve in the military. Lettie often speculated about their excuses for not being in active service. Red Cross work was important, surely, but neither man seemed indispensable. Lettie's guess that Mr. Perry fainted at the sight of blood amused Marie.

Mr. Perry droned on about the past week's accomplish-

ments, often praising Anne, even when they all knew she hadn't been at a particular camp. Some of the women fidgeted while others stifled yawns. Even Mr. Walton seemed bored, staring out the window.

"Now then, does anyone have any new thoughts on raising our military men's morale?" He looked straight at Anne.

Marie had her page of notes ready and started to hold up her finger when Anne jumped in. "Oh, I've got a great idea. We can involve the natives and ask them to give concerts for the men."

Marie's jaw dropped.

Lettie scoffed. "You got that great idea by listening to Marie last night. She came up with it."

Mr. Perry pointed at Lettie. "Don't be rude. Give Anne the opportunity to explain her idea."

Several of the women gasped. Even Mr. Walton frowned as he shifted in his chair.

Anne preened. "They probably wouldn't be able to bring a tuned piano or sing in their own language, but possibly a string quartet."

Marie's blood boiled. "No, no string ensembles. They're too ..." She laid her hand on the table near Betty. "What did you call it?"

"Longhaired. Too refined for our boys to fully appreciate. Most of them, anyway."

"Right." She directed her words to Mr. Walton. "My idea is for brass ensembles, maybe with drums."

Helen laughed. When all eyes turned her way, she said, "Loud music that will keep them awake."

Before Mr. Perry could regain the floor, Marie continued. "A lot of the men like guitars and wish they had brought their own with them. I don't know if there are any Icelandic guitar groups, but if there are, they'd find a receptive audience here."



“Good idea.” Mr. Walton nodded as he jotted notes. “Even one or two guitarists might be willing to have a jam session with small groups of the men. Anything else?”

She took a deep breath. This one could open her to Mr. Perry’s scorn. “I attended an Easter service at a church in Reykjavik. While I didn’t understand the words, being in the church was ...”

“Soothing.” Betty supplied the right word.

“Yes. Some of the men who were churchgoers at home may enjoy the formal atmosphere found in a church. It would be a huge imposition, but it would be nice if a church could offer something. Maybe just the building, and our own chaplains and a small choir ...”

“Ha.” Anne sat back with crossed arms. “There isn’t a choir.”

“There could be.” Betty refused to yield. “Memorial Day is coming up. That would be a nice occasion to have a special service.”

“It would indeed.” Mr. Walton glanced at Mr. Perry with a raised brow.

The director scowled as he looked around the table. “Are you quite finished?”

When no one spoke, he smiled at Anne. “Write up your idea, would you, dear? Now then, any other matters of business?”

Marie pursed her lips. He acted like she’d hijacked the meeting. She stiffened her spine. “We continue to have problems keeping our mimeographed song sheets, because the men like to take them.” She paused. No need to point out that Anne’s idea of chalking lyrics on a blackboard would only work for one song and not be visible to those beyond the front of the room. “I heard the army has an overhead projector. I doubt they’d let us use it, but we could ask.”

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“You’re right. The army won’t share it.” Mr. Perry dismissed her idea, but Mr. Walton scribbled on his notepad. “Anything else worth our while?”

Beside her, Betty scoffed quietly. Mr. Perry couldn’t have been clearer that Marie was wasting their time.

Marie refused to back down. “Can we obtain kites?”

Mr. Walton lifted his head. “Kites?”

She nodded. “Several of the boys were talking about flying kites. They feel Iceland is a good place to do so because there are no trees for them to get stuck in.”

Lettie snickered, prompting everyone to laugh. Everyone except Anne and Mr. Perry. Mr. Walton declared he’d send the suggestion to headquarters.

As they rose to leave, Anne approached Marie with her hand out. “I’ll take your notes for the minutes.”

“The minutes? Mr. Walton writes the minutes.” Lettie made quote marks with her fingers. “All Mr. Perry expects from you are the details of Marie’s idea for concerts.”

Marie shoved her notes into her pocket. She’d never do well at committee work. Someone always had to cause contention and dampen the mood. So much antagonism made her head ache. She needed air.

Slipping away from the others, she set off on a brisk walk. Rounding a supply shed, she collided with a solid chest. The impact knocked the wind out of her. Hands caught her arms, and her gaze rose to tangle with the bluest eyes she’d ever seen.