

Chapter Three



Pearl Harbor Naval Hospital

December 11, 1941

“I miss the tropical hours we enjoyed before the fleet transferred to Hawaii last year.”

Gloria glanced up from preparing hypodermics. “Why do you say that, Blanche?”

“There were eight of us nurses, and we worked from eight until noon, unless you were the nurse who covered the units until three. Lots of aviators attached to Ford Island had cars. We’d swim at the beach, play tennis, have picnics, and dance under the stars at the spiffy Royal Hawaiian Hotel.” Blanche hugged herself and spun in a full circle. “Then the fleet came. That was in April of 1940. They were only supposed to be here for a couple weeks, but they never returned to California.”

“Sounds like you were on vacation rather than here to nurse.” Gloria locked the hypodermics in the medication cabinet and recorded her work on a chart. She nodded at

Frances, who entered the supply room with a tall stack of dressings.

“For sure. We were spoiled. We each had our own room, and iced tea was always available.”

Frances deposited her load onto the counter. “And then the Japs had to come and wreak havoc on the Navy and ruin your life of leisure.”

“They sure did.” Blanche bit her lip, apparently recognizing Frances’s sarcasm too late. “Actually, everything changed when the fleet made this their home port. The nursing staff grew to thirty, and lots of delectable doctors and corpsmen joined us.”

Gloria rolled her eyes at Frances, who gave a disgusted shake of her head. Blanche still tried to get by with as little effort as possible. None of the nurses cared to be paired with her, knowing they’d have to perform most of the tasks.

Gloria tidied the work station. “Excuse me, ladies. I have to head back to the ward.”

“Me too.” Frances followed her into the hallway. “I don’t know why she hasn’t been replaced.”

Truth be told, Gloria didn’t enjoy working with either woman. Blanche preferred to talk rather than work, and Frances complained all the time.

How did the nurses perceive her? She tried to be cheerful and ready with a friendly word. Mom always said the way to have a friend was to be a friend, and Gloria enjoyed being around friendly, cheerful people.

Mom also said some people were impossible to please. Gloria had met enough folks like that at nursing school and when she’d joined the Navy. Dad would say she shouldn’t try to become too comfortable on Earth. Only Heaven guaranteed total contentment, joy, and love.

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He would also say she must accept all people as God accepted them. She could do no less. Love the unlovable, like Blanche and Frances. Goodness knew she had trouble with that.

After checking the time, she quickened her steps. One last round of the ward, and she would be off. She wanted to head for the *Solace* and visit Lucy. They could go into Honolulu and shop for perfume. Or go to the beach. She needed the relaxation after the last four days.

When her shift ended, Gloria headed for the side exit, but her replacement called her back.

“Someone’s waiting for you at the front desk,” she said. “An airman. Is he ever cute.” She wiggled her eyebrows before disappearing into the ward.

An airman was waiting for her? Gloria’s heart fluttered. Who else could it be but John? She rushed to check out from work.

John loitered by the door. A bandage no longer decorated his forehead, but the cane’s continued presence surprised her. His grin threatened to turn her heart to mush.

“You’re working the night shift.” He stated the fact as though it were a punishment.

“We rotate.” She glanced back to make sure no one overheard her. “Although, since it wasn’t my turn for nights, I do wonder if I received the assignment because I was absent on Sunday.”

“You worked all day on the hospital ship.”

“Yes, but as long as I worked on my day off, I should have worked here.” She pointed around the room. Honestly, the supervisor had been entirely unreasonable in her displeasure. “I was informed that the captain of the *Nevada*, who had been ashore, found his way to his ship, even though it skedaddled

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down Battleship Row during the attack in its effort to escape. With a little determination, I should have returned to my duty station.”

John scoffed. “Kind of hard to find a ride when you’re up to your elbows in blood and charred flesh.”

His defense warmed her.

He opened the door. “How about I take you out to breakfast?”

“Away from the mess halls? That would be a treat.” She sneaked a glance at her uniform. Still presentable. No blood.

John led her to a parking lot and fished out the key to an older Chevrolet. “This car belonged to one of the pilots who died on Sunday. He always let us borrow it as long as we replaced the gas. We buried him yesterday and decided he wouldn’t mind if we continued to use the car.”

As he drove toward Honolulu, Gloria asked about the cane. “Do you still have pain?”

His hand fluttered on the steering wheel. “The gash wasn’t healing well. It was red and swollen. A doc opened the stitches, pressed on it, and a glob of pus squirted out.” He grinned at her. “The medic at the BOQ Sunday gave it a splash of scotch, but I guess all that did was make my wound drunk.”

Gloria managed a smile, but she worried her chin with her fingers. Hadn’t she thoroughly cleaned his wound? Had the doctor’s hands been dirty when he stitched John’s leg? Had Gloria transmitted germs when she handed a suture to the doctor?

He didn’t seem to notice her unease. “How long have you been in Hawaii?”

“I arrived in July on a fancy cruise ship, the *Lurline*.”

“So, you’ve had a taste of grand living.” He pulled into the parking lot of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. “Have you eaten here? It’s quite the swanky place.”

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“The Pink Palace?” Gloria couldn’t help but squeal. The hotel catered to well-heeled clientele. Its prices tended to be out of reach for young military officers. The Moara next door was more in line with John’s salary. He was treating her like a queen. “I haven’t eaten here, but we attended a show where Hilo Hattie sang and danced. She performs hulas as comedy. I loved it. I love Hawaiian music.”

After stepping out of the car, she performed a few hula moves. “My friend Lucy and I thought about taking hula lessons, but now ...”

“Grab the chance while you have it.” John led her to the lanai dining room, where they sat by a window with an ocean view. “It would be a good distraction from all the horrors you must witness tending to wounded sailors.”

The hostess offered menus, and Gloria zeroed in on her choice—thick slices of French toast. John opted for blueberry pancakes and a single sunny-side up egg. He requested a side order of fresh fruit for them to share.

When the hostess left, John leaned forward. “The hostesses used to wear kimonos. It didn’t take long for those to disappear.”

“And for barbed wire to appear.” Gloria pointed to the rolls of wire spanning Waikiki Beach.

“And for martial law and blackouts to go into effect.”

She pushed aside the gloomy thoughts. “What do you do for relaxation?”

“Take pictures.” He tucked his thumbs under his collar and raised his chin. “I am my squadron’s photographer.”

Gloria spread her napkin on her lap. “I remember you always took pictures with a Brownie camera Mr. Larson gave you.”

“Yep. I worked as a pinboy at the bowling alley to earn

money for film. That's not a job I recommend." He lowered his brows. "My old man thought I stole the camera."

"Why would he think that?"

"Why would someone give me a camera?" He stared out the window. "He never cared about me."

Gloria gulped. Mr. Walsh had never been a bundle of sunshine, but ... "How could he not care about you?"

John flashed her a smile as he leaned back while the hostess served their meals. He slid his egg onto a pancake, broke the yoke, and smeared the gooey yellow substance around like frosting. Taking a giant bite, he closed his eyes. "They don't cook like this at the mess hall."

Gloria speared a slice of pineapple onto her plate and waited for him to answer her question.

"You know I'm the youngest of seven, right? Did you know that Dora, Herman, and Esther are Busches? Their father scratched his wrist on a meat hook in his butcher shop and died of blood poisoning the next day. Dad had been his apprentice and married his widow."

Finishing his egg, he smothered the rest of his pancakes with syrup. "I don't know if he felt pressured into marrying Mom, or if supporting seven children was too much. He's never been a jovial sort. Never one to have heart-to-heart talks with us. Or at least with me."

The French toast was scrumptious but settled heavily in Gloria's stomach. "Weren't you, Daniel, and Stefan in the store once and he ordered you all out?"

"Ha. Yeah. I told him I had to sweep the floor. That was my chore. He stared at me." John raised his hands. "'I'm John. Your son,' I said. So, he told me to start sweeping."

"That made a deep impression on Daniel. He told Grandpa about it a few days later. Didn't he start wearing glasses soon afterward?"

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“Sure, but I don’t think you can say I was too blurry to recognize. What about my voice? He’s not deaf. Why are we even talking about him?” John straightened. “I remember a photo I took of you and Theresa. Theresa stuck out her tongue—not a flattering image. You smiled.”

Gloria remembered that day. John’s desire to photograph them had thrilled her, and she’d given him a happy smile.

“Why’d you join the Navy?” he asked. “Your dad was in the Army.”

“I’d hoped to work as a surgical nurse at St. Mary’s Hospital, but instead, I worked in Doctor Korsak’s office, holding down screaming kids while he checked their ears. I dated his son Roy in high school, and I think the doctor was behind my placement, hoping to bring us back together. But Roy liked me more than I liked him.”

She sliced the pineapple into bite-sized chunks. “I met a Navy nurse, and she gave me a brochure. I thought working in the Navy would be more meaningful than the doctor’s office. We knew war was coming. It’s my way to serve. On Sunday, some of the wounded sailors groaned, but a lot of them said, ‘Help my buddy first.’ No whining, no cussing.” She watched a little girl skip between her parents, heading for the beach. “I like children, but I’m not a pediatric nurse.

“Sunday was an eye-opener. Being a Navy nurse in wartime isn’t like working in a hospital at home. There, sick people require surgery. They don’t feel well, and we correct the ailment. After the attack, we operated on healthy young men who suddenly weren’t healthy. Torn apart, charred to a crisp.”

She swallowed hard. “At first, I wondered if I belonged here. The burn unit, the smell. We’re not supposed to show emotion but, John, it was so awful.”

“But you bucked up. Told your stomach to settle down.”

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He grinned, then his eyes darkened. “Their injuries will stay with them all their lives.”

Gloria nodded as she scraped up the last bite of French toast and pasted on a smile. “I also joined the Navy because I wanted to get away, to see the world.” She waved at the ocean. “Most of my classmates have married.”

“You felt left out.” John didn’t ask. He stated it as a fact. “Are your folks okay with you being in the military?”

“Mom took a bit of convincing, but Dad never forgot the nurses who cared for him in France.”

“Do you hear from Theresa much?”

“Rarely.” Gloria shrugged. “We’re not close anymore. My parents prefer I not spend time with her. She changed in high school. Dad says she’s toxic for me. I was picking up her mannerisms, being irritable all the time.” She swallowed. “Back-talking, criticizing, bossing my siblings, being a brat.”

“You? A brat? Not the little cherub I remember.” John tilted his head as he regarded her. “She married a classmate, right? Daniel considers her husband a jerk. Did he lead her astray?”

Gloria sputtered in her orange juice. She grabbed her napkin to pat her lips. “I wonder what Aunt Elisabeth thinks of him. She wasn’t happy when Mom told her they didn’t want me spending time with Theresa. I think Aunt Elisabeth hoped I’d rub off on Theresa instead of vice versa.”

John shrugged. “Avoiding Theresa sounds like a first-rate idea. Do you miss life in Wisconsin? I’ll bet snow is blowing around now.”

“I love it here. The beaches, the flowers, the mountains, the music, the pineapple. The Navy had us list where we’d most like to be stationed. I put Pearl Harbor as number one, and I won the jackpot.” She hoisted a chunk of fruit on her fork. “I miss my family. I miss Wisconsin birds. I’d wake up to robins

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singing, and I'd listen for the chickadees, which are my favorite. They're so playful."

John whistled the male bird's clear two-note song.

Gloria shivered when a chill ran down her spine. "Exactly. I imagine they're saying, 'tee-hee, tee-hee.'" She pulled some bookmarks from her purse and spread them on the table. "I draw them."

He pulled the bookmarks close and studied them. "I didn't know you were an artist. These are great." He held up the one with the chickadee's head cocked at an inquisitive angle. "May I have this one?"

She nodded. He wanted her drawing!

The hostess brought their bill. John glanced at it and laid money on the table. "Want to walk on the beach?"

She loved walking on the beach, but ... "In a dress?"

He shrugged. "How often do you visit Waikiki? There's a women's lounge. Go take off your shoes and stockings."

"I will."

When they rose from the table, John clutched his leg and steadied himself. "For such a small cut, this sure is a bother."

"Are you certain you want to walk on sand?"

He eased his weight onto his leg. "Yes. My enemies will not defeat me."

They made it through the soft sand to where the tide offered firmer footing. A wave cleared the sand off John's toes. "Sometimes, when I allow myself to think about Sunday, I struggle with anger."

"With the Japanese?"

"No. At them." John pointed at a group of sailors passing them.

A moment passed before Gloria spotted the name on one man's duffle. *Nevada*.

A sailor stepped forward in a belligerent stance. "Why you

angry with us, flyboy? You jealous 'cuz your ship didn't make a run for it like ours did?"

"My ship was smart enough to be out of port. Making a run didn't give you the right to shoot me down. You need to learn enemy recognition."

Four jaws dangled. Gloria touched John's arm. These four boys could make mincemeat out of him.

The feisty one jutted his chin forward. "Why were you flying over Battleship Row?"

The man's pals shifted, and one said, "Come on, Marvin."

John didn't let him get away with it. "We were in our usual flight pattern, well-known to the ships." He clenched his fist. "Blue Section was wiped out. Al was a new father. Roland was about to be married. Lester was his widowed mother's only son. Murdered by thoughtless, trigger-happy sailors. You must be very proud."

Taking Gloria's hand, he pushed past them. She heard one of them mention the *Enterprise*.

"Sorry about that. They were so cocky. They need to know what they did." John paused and looked at the horizon. "When I was shot down on the golf course, another section pilot was already down. When the Marines shot at me, he charged over, waving his gun and cussing them out." He huffed. "I just mimicked Hank Sherman. Can you believe that? He's a blowhard, but I'm easygoing. If I had better balance, I might have taken a swing at that buffoon."

"I think you needed to let off some steam." John still held her hand, and she patted it. "I wouldn't have let you throw a punch."

He laughed. "Glory Hallelujah, the peacemaker. I am sorry about that."

When they returned to the Naval Hospital, John stared across the channel at the *Enterprise*. "I imagine we'll be sent

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out to pick a fight with the real enemy before long. Somewhere in the vast Pacific.”

“I’ll be going out there too.”

His lips spread into a slow smile. “On the *Enterprise*?”

“No.” Gloria clasped her hands together. “I’ve put in for a transfer to a hospital ship.”