

COURAGEOUS
FOOTSTEPS

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A WWII Novel

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*For Art Matsuura and his family
my wonderful neighbors and life-long friends.*

Their lives inspired me to write this book.



CHAPTER 1

December 1941

Wrapped in her robe, Yasu scooted down the hallway with Kenta, the family's loyal German shepherd, at her heels. When her brother Haro joined them in the hallway, Kenta snuggled up to his leg. With only one small bathroom in the house, the schedule was tight. Seeing her chance, Yasu quickly slipped into the bathroom and beat her brother at their morning competition—a daily challenge Haro enjoyed winning.

“Hey! No fair!” he yelled from the hallway.

Pleased to have beaten her brother, Yasu quickly bolted the door, washed her face and combed her hair. The minute she opened the bathroom door, her brother pounced on her. At seventeen and two years older, he was always ready to take on his sister's challenges.

“Think you're pretty smart, huh? Well, I'll get you tomorrow.”

She flashed her brother a smile and wiggled out of his grasp. “We'll see about that.”

The aroma of hot chocolate swirled around the cozy kitchen

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as she slid onto the hard bench of the breakfast nook. Kenta settled down on the tattered rug by the back door. Her father, engrossed in the *Los Angeles Times*, paused and looked at his daughter as she nestled in next to him.

“Good morning, my sweet butterfly.” He had called her “butterfly”—a Japanese symbol of joy and longevity—for as long as she could remember.

At ten o’clock they walked to Sunrise Lutheran Church together. After the service they returned home and enjoyed Mother’s delicious roast chicken dinner. As soon as the meal was over, Haro retreated to his attic bedroom while Yasu finished the dishes and then joined her parents in the tiny living room. She cuddled up next to Kenta on the floor. As she stroked his heavy fur, she thought about her sixteenth birthday just weeks away. She looked forward to sharing a hot fudge sundae at Floyd’s Burgers with her friend Ruth. She had known Ruth since second grade, and they did everything together. As she listened to the radio, Glenn Miller’s trombone pulsed the catchy rhythm of “In the Mood.”

A panic-filled voice broke through the music. “Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor! Early morning attack! Thousands dead! Flames! Smoke! Relentless attack!”

Words of war crackled through the fabric of the radio speaker until the music program returned. The Sakamotos continued to listen as frequent updates to the devastating attack on Pearl Harbor interrupted the Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller tunes on the radio. Yasu eased herself off the floor. When she

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sat down beside her father, he gently held her hand. Worried about the horrific attack, they sat in silence.

Finally Yasu looked up. "Father, why did this happen?"

Mr. Sakamoto leaned forward in his chair and shook his head. "I don't know."



Haro bounded down the attic steps and ran into the living room. "Did you hear? Japan attacked Pearl Harbor!"

"Yes, we heard." After a short pause, Father continued, "We need to see what President Roosevelt says and trust his decision. Remember, you're Nisei. Born in this country and we're American citizens. We will stay calm and pray for the families of those who died."

Haro spun around, ran upstairs and slammed his bedroom door. He stomped across the wood floor to his bookshelf. He turned on his brown Firestone AC/DC radio he'd bought with money he'd earned stocking shelves at his father's grocery store. In the summer of forty he'd finally saved enough money to buy it for \$7.95. He remembered running his hand over the smooth walnut-colored surface made of Bakelite plastic. When he'd clicked the button on for the first time, he'd been thrilled to hear the static and even more excited when music flowed through the speaker.

With his radio blaring in the background, Haro climbed on a chair, dug into the far corner of the highest shelf of his closet

and pulled out a half-full pack of Pall Malls. He held a cigarette between his lips, lit it with matches he pilfered from Hank's Bar and flicked the match out the window. Music flowed from the radio as Haro pictured Japanese fighter planes roaring through the sky as they dropped bombs on U.S. naval ships, the black-gray smoke and flames bursting from the destroyed ships in the early dawn.

"We interrupt this broadcast with an announcement from the United Press. FLASH! President Roosevelt has officially declared war on Japan!"

Haro took a long drag on his cigarette and blew the smoke out the window. Images of men dead in their bunks haunted him. He stared at his bedroom shelves filled with model airplanes, baseball photos and his cherished marble collection as the words "war on Japan" tumbled through his head.



As Yasu sat at the dining room table, she struggled to focus on her algebra equations, but X and Y didn't equal anything. Nothing made sense. She scribbled designs in the margin of her paper while her mind focused on the attack on Pearl Harbor. After an hour she gave up and decided to read her literature assignment, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. As afternoon faded into evening, a subdued mood filled the house until Kenta's barking and growling broke through the silence. She dashed into the living room.

A black four-door sedan parked in front of the house, and

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two men wearing double-breasted suits and fedora hats got out. They pushed open the gate and marched up the sidewalk. Yasu held her breath as her father moved slowly toward the front door.

He grabbed Kenta “Hush, Kenta!” When he saw Yasu, he said, “Lock him on the back porch and go to your room.”

She took the strong German shepherd by the collar and quickly guided him down the hallway and through the kitchen. “Stay,” she commanded as she backed away.

Kenta growled and pawed the door as Yasu edged down the hallway. She peered into the living room, trying to catch a glimpse of the strangers.

Her father’s tense voice echoed in her head. Fear and a sense of urgency pushed her into her bedroom. The sound of her mother’s worn slippers hurrying across the wood floor triggered panic inside her. She pressed her ear against the oak door, but only a few words filtered through the muted voices, president’s orders . . . G-men . . . war suspects. She turned the brass knob and cracked open the bedroom door. Haro sat on the stairs with a puzzled look on his face. Through the narrow slit, she caught a glimpse of the two men standing in the middle of the living room. Her parents stood shoulder to shoulder next to the davenport and watched as the strangers rummaged through the room.

Who are these men? Why are they in our living room? she wondered.

The tall man in the black suit pawed through the dining room cabinets that held precious treasures her mother’s family had brought to America. Yasu remembered her father’s stories

about his family leaving Japan on a cargo ship and arriving in San Francisco with only a few valued possessions and their hopes of a new life. She pulled the door open wider.

The other man flipped through a packet of documents tied with string. Then he stuffed them in his coat pocket and turned to her father. “Mr. Sakamoto, you need to come with us to answer a few questions.”

Shock rolled across her father’s face. “I haven’t done anything wrong. My family and I are loyal Americans.”

“Just following orders. Get your coat and come with us. When you’re cleared, you can return to your family.” The man in the gray hat glanced up and locked eyes with Yasu.

She drew in a deep breath, dashed into the living room and wrapped her arms around her father. “You can’t take him! Please, please don’t! He’s a good man!” she screamed

The man in the gray suit looked at her. “Don’t worry. He’ll be back soon.”

Haro ran into the room as Mrs. Sakamoto pulled her daughter away and held her hand.

The three of them stood by the double-paned living room window and watched as the men cuffed their father’s hands and eased him into the backseat of the sedan. When the car disappeared down Van Brunt Street, Yasu ran to her bedroom. She clutched the quilt her grandmother had made and sobbed into the worn fabric. She squeezed her eyes closed and forced the images of the strangers away as their words *president’s orders* and *traitor* lingered in her head.



CHAPTER 2

A cloud of anger clung to Haro as he marched into the back porch and released Kenta from his captivity. The German shepherd wagged his tail and bounded down the steps.

Haro returned to his bedroom, slammed the door and lit a fresh cigarette. He paced, blowing smoke above his head. He put on his cotton jacket, and with the pack of cigarettes stuffed in his pocket, he ran down the attic stairs, hoping to find his friends at the billiard hall. He hurried past the living room and out the back door without his mother noticing.

“No, you can’t come. Stay.”

Kenta tipped his head and whimpered as Haro disappeared into the darkness.

Heading for Bernie’s Billiards where his friends hung out on Sunday nights, Haro wandered down the alleys and along cracked sidewalks. In the dim glow of the streetlights, a strange silence covered the neighborhood. Danger loomed among the rows of bungalows lined up shoulder to shoulder along the boulevards. His footsteps echoed on the pavement and mingled with the rumble of tires from an occasional car. His heart pounded

as he neared the billiard hall on Broadway. He hoped Ray, his rich buddy who had graduated two years ahead of him, would be there.

When Haro opened the squeaky screen door, the jukebox greeted him with the sound of Tommy Dorsey's trombone pumping out "Boogie Woogie." The sound of the billiard balls welcomed Haro to the smoke filled tavern. Men dressed in hats, vests and ties puffed on pipes and cigars while their table mates lined up their next shot as if they were sighting a rifle or shotgun for the kill. Careful not to bump anyone, he slowly wove among the tables. On the far side of the room, his buddies stood together in the corner with their cigarettes dangling from their lips.

"Hey, Ray!" Haro shouted as he approached the table.

Distracted from his shot, Ray glanced up. His eyes landed on Haro. Without responding, he said, "Three in the corner." His eyes shifted several times between the cue ball and the red one. He struck the scuffed cue ball on center and sent it in a straight line across the table. The three ball dropped into the corner while the cue ball stopped just short of the pocket.

Haro waited until his friend finished his next shot. This time the ball missed the pocket and rebounded off the felt covered rail.

"Damn! So close, thought for sure that was goin' in!" Ray yelled and took a swig of beer.

Haro walked over and patted him on the shoulder. "Tough shot. Ya almost made that one."

Ray shook him off. "Get your damn hands off me!"

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Shocked and confused, Haro stepped back. Huddled together, the guys glared at him. Hazy clouds of smoke formed above their heads as the click of billiard balls and the lyrics of “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” bounced through the tavern.

“Hey, what’s goin’ on? What’d I do?” Haro asked.

A stranger by the jukebox yelled, “You’re a Jap! Pearl Harbor’s whatcha did! You’ll get your ass out of here if you know what’s good for ya. Murderers ain’t welcome here, ever!”

He stared at his buddies still clustered together. Ray charged past the billiard table, grabbed Haro by the jacket and pulled him toward him. His blue eyes smoldered with unshackled anger.

“Don’t call me your friend. You’re a traitor, an enemy!”

Surrounded by strangers, Haro struggled to free himself from Ray’s grip. One man grabbed his arms from behind and held them while two others delivered endless blows to his face. They kicked him in the stomach. When they slammed him into the wall, the cue rack splintered into pieces. After receiving the final blow to his bloody face, he dropped to the floor.

“What the hell you doin’! Take it outside!” Bernie yelled from behind the bar.

Haro grabbed the leg of the billiard table, pulled himself up and shuffled out the door. With Bernie’s Billiards sign glowing above him, he straightened his clothes. He brushed a trembling hand across the gash in his forehead and wiped the bloody sweat on his black pants. He stumbled along the sidewalk in the darkness.

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Welcomed home by the dim glow of the light above the door, Haro snuck into the back porch.

“Shh, good boy.” He patted Kenta on the head. Then he snuck through the dark hallway and stepped over the squeaky step at the top of the attic stairs. Stretched out on his bed, he stared at the night sky through the window. His head throbbed as a painful reminder of the unexpected beating.



While Haro was out for the evening, Yasu and her mother sat around the radio with a pile of mending for Mrs. Bollin, the wife of the Glenville Power Company manager. Worried about father, Yasu turned on the radio. She waited until the tube warmed up and voices crackled from the speaker and then tuned in a local station with the least amount of static. She snuggled into the rocking chair and waited for her favorite Sunday night broadcast. Organ music flowed through the speaker, followed by the announcer’s voice. “Welcome to the Pan American Coffee Bureau’s broadcast from Washington, D.C. We bring you a serious announcement about Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor.”

Eleanor Roosevelt’s voice welcomed the listeners. “Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Congress and military officials are with the president. Soon they will release a full report and plan for action. Many sons and husbands will be called to support America and face our enemy, Japan. We must show the world that America is powerful and dedicated to freedom. Even

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the young people listening tonight need to support America. We must be strong. Thank you and good night.”

As the two of them sat in silence, the radio filled the bungalow with the sound of Tommy Dorsey’s band playing “I’ll Never Smile Again.” Yasu slowly pushed the needle up through the thin fabric of Mr. Bollin’s white shirt. Every few stitches, she glanced at the clock. When the chime rang ten times and there was no sign of her father, they packed their mending baskets and turned out the lights.



The next morning when Kenta heard Haro’s feet lumbering down the attic steps, he jumped off his rug.

Without stopping to use the bathroom or even caring if her brother won their morning competition, Yasu bolted into the kitchen and collided with Kenta. Puzzled that Father’s space at the kitchen table was empty, she said, “I didn’t hear Father come home last night. Did he leave for the store already?”

Mother shook her head. “He hasn’t come home yet.”

“Why are they keeping him so long? Where is he?”

“I don’t know but I’m sure we’ll hear something today.”

Yasu swallowed the sadness stuck in her throat. When she reached the bathroom door, she heard running water. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Hurry up, you’ve been in there forever!”

With no response from her brother, she gave up, returned to

her room and crawled back in bed. Losing the bathroom battle didn't matter. All she wanted was her father back.



Haro examined the gash on his forehead from every possible angle trying to figure out how to conceal it. He searched through the wooden medicine cabinet and found a bottle of iodine on the top shelf. He stared at the skull and crossbones on the label and then leaned closer to the mirror. He carefully lifted the brush to his forehead and dabbed the iodine along the cut. He clenched his teeth and waited for the sting to stop. He put the iodine back on the top shelf exactly where he'd found it and reached for the tin of bandages, but stopped. A bandage would draw attention to the gash.

He rinsed the flecks of iodine out of the sink and flipped his hair over the gash, hoping no one would notice. When he opened the door, Yasu ran into the bathroom without looking at him and slammed the door shut.

Haro dashed through the hallway into the kitchen and grabbed his books off the counter where he left them every day when he came home from school.

"Haro, you need to eat breakfast."

"Can't! I'm in a hurry. Early study session!" he yelled as he darted through the porch past his mother's washing machine that was filled with Mrs. Bollin's laundry. He sprinted down the wooden steps, through the gate and into the alley.