

# THE LONG MARCH HOME

A WORLD WAR II NOVEL *of the* PACIFIC



MARCUS BROTHERTON  
*and* TOSCA LEE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS

“Tosca Lee and Marcus Brotherton bring to life the Pacific theater as seen through the eyes of three young enlisted men, once boyhood friends and now fellow soldiers. Packed with tension, peril, and the unimaginable horrors of a world at war, *The Long March Home* also reaches inside, bringing forth the lives lived and taken amid the turmoil . . . and a lost love that may yet be found in the ashes.”

**Lisa Wingate**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*Before We Were Yours* and *The Book of Lost Friends*

“Historically sound and deeply empathic, *The Long March Home* tells the remarkable story of three teenage boys and the girl they all adored before signing up to fight in the South Pacific during World War II. Captured, forced through the infamous Bataan Death March, and cast into the squalor of Japanese prison camps, the boys quickly become men who try to survive on memories of love. I’ve never read anything quite like it.”

**Mark Sullivan**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*Beneath a Scarlet Sky* and *The Last Green Valley*

“*The Long March Home* is a riveting tale of friendship and war, survival and heroism. Well researched and authentic, it’s a novel not to be missed by readers who find themselves spellbound by tales involving the Second World War.”

**Mark Greaney**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author  
of *Burner: A Gray Man Novel*

“This story has such a personal feel to it that it reads more like a memoir than fiction. It has such real characters that I was rooting for them through their harrowing ordeal and weeping for those who were lost.”

**Rhys Bowen**, *New York Times* bestselling author  
of *The Venice Sketchbook*

“An utterly compelling exploration of the tenacity and resilience of the human spirit. Here is an outstanding story by two master wordsmiths that honors not only those who died and those who survived the Bataan Death March but all who spent the years of World War II as prisoners. It is heart-wrenching one moment and utterly exhilarating the next. You won’t be able to put it down.”

**Susan Meissner**, *USA Today* bestselling author  
of *The Nature of Fragile Things*

“Sometimes novelists can trump historians in bringing the past to life. That is certainly the case in Marcus Brotherton and Tosca Lee’s *The Long March Home*, which re-creates the hell of the Bataan Death March in stark clarity. It’s fiction—but it’s truth.”

**Stephen Hunter**, Pulitzer Prize-winning and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Point of Impact* and *Basil’s War*

“*The Long March Home* is a dazzling, gripping, compelling story of friendship and war, of courage and grief, of horror and survival. Vividly painted and compassionately told, it’s a story that deserves to be remembered. A must-read.”

**Joseph Finder**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *House on Fire*

“A powerful experience, a gripping story about the strength and resilience of the human heart, and a chapter of World War II history that shouldn’t be forgotten.”

**Edward Burns**, filmmaker (*The Brothers McMullen*)  
and actor (*Saving Private Ryan*)

“Not since *Once an Eagle* has a novel so thoroughly captured what it means to go to war, fight, and return home with honor. *The Long March Home* is a story of friendship, courage, and relentless love. You’ll cheer through your tears for the three small-town boys who must weather one of World War II’s darkest moments with nothing but their unbreakable brotherhood to sustain them. Simply magnificent.”

**Don Bentley**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Hostile Intent*

“From Mobile to Manila, Brotherton and Lee deliver one power-punched scene after another, crafting an emotionally charged, sensory-rich story of three young soldiers and the people who love them. With a perfect blend of writing styles and a page-turning plotline, *The Long March Home* will leave readers longing for more from this dynamic duo.”

**Julie Cantrell**, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Perennials*

“A beautiful story of youth and friendship. Inspired by true stories, this is a fascinating and visual account.”

**Loucas George**, producer of hit TV series *Nashville*

“A story full of hope, courage, friendship, faith, and loss told in a way that only true master storytellers like Brotherton and Lee can, *The Long March Home* takes you on a wonderful and horrible journey through the eyes of characters so real they leap from the page. You will read this book more than once, as we did, and it will find a very special place on your bookshelf.”

**Andrews and Wilson**, internationally bestselling authors of the  
Shepherds, Tier One, and Sons of Valor series

“*The Long March Home* is a thrilling story, excellently told. It’s a tale of friendship and hope during one of history’s darkest moments. Brotherton and Lee are at the top of their game.”

**Tyrell Johnson**, internationally bestselling author of  
*The Wolves of Winter* and *The Lost Kings*

“Marcus Brotherton and Tosca Lee have crafted a well-written story of the hell soldiers of the American Army faced on Bataan and later as prisoners of the Japanese in World War II. Very few survivors remain, and Brotherton and Lee do a good job of weaving together details of published accounts to keep this almost forgotten story alive.”

**Donald Caldwell**, historian and author of *Thunder on Bataan*

“Brotherton and Lee have crafted a profoundly human story set against the epic backdrop of the Pacific theater of World War II. *The Long March Home* weaves a fragile thread of hope, resilience, forgiveness, and the powerful love of friends even in the midst of the hellish conditions of war, imprisonment, and torture. This story of the ‘Battling Bastards of Bataan’ is not to be missed.”

**Caleb McCary**, twenty-one-year Army veteran and chaplain

“*Band of Brothers* meets *Empire of the Sun*. Amid vivid scene-setting, a captivating young narrator brings us the innocence, steel, and moral choices that come from a world being turned upside down, with one thought on a girl back home and another on surviving until the end of the day. Jimmy Propfield even brings to mind Voltaire’s *Candide*. This is war-writing at the highest level.”

**Humphrey Hawksley**, BBC correspondent and author of *Man on Ice*

“*The Long March Home* is an immersive, deeply human portrait of the horrors of war and loss. The Bataan Death March is a little-known slice of World War II history that Lee and Brotherton depict with a blend of

vivid detail and great sensitivity. With compelling characters and vibrant prose, *The Long March Home* is a must-read for connoisseurs of World War fiction.”

**Aimie K. Runyan**, bestselling author of *The School for German Brides*

“Not since James Jones has anyone written so well and tellingly of the war in the Pacific and the largely untold story of the ‘Battling Bastards of Bataan.’ Authentic, raw, and heartbreaking, this compelling tale of love and war and friendship in the face of impossible odds is a powerful and unputdownable read. A tremendous story.”

**Andrew Kaplan**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Blue Madagascar*

“*The Long March Home* is a remarkable novel. It’s the story of a different age—the greatest generation caught up in its hour of greatest peril and pain—beautifully and faultlessly told by authors who know their craft. Brotherton and Lee craft characters so real they grab you by the throat and draw you into the story, so much so that their survival becomes your own. This memorable story will remain with you long after the final page.”

**Steve Martini**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Blood Flag*

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The portion of Don Bell's radio announcement on page 31 is from an actual radio broadcast as recounted in A.V. H. Hartendorp, *The Japanese Occupation of the Philippines*, vol. 1 (Manila: Bookmark, 1967), 5, 470–71.

The “Battling Bastards of Bataan” on page 102 is part of the historic and widely documented oral history of the sick, starving, and undersupplied Allied forces struggling to maintain control of the Bataan Peninsula after General MacArthur obeyed President Roosevelt's command to leave the Philippines—and its fighting men—behind.

The proclamation on pages 103–4 from the Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Japanese Forces is an actual U.S. War Department communiqué, as recounted by 2nd Lt. John Posten, Fighter Pilot, 17th Pursuit Squadron, in Donald Knox, *Death March: The Survivors of Bataan* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 90–91.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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For all who are finding their way home.







Inspired by true stories.

JULY 8, 1941

*Dear Jimmy,*

*You left without a single word. How could you, James Pierce Propfield? Just three nights ago we danced and life was beautiful and almost like old times. Now you're gone and everything's different.*

*There are things you need to know, Jimmy. But you might as well be a ghost. I could hate you for leaving the way you did.*

*Then I feel guilty for thinking of myself when you're headed off to God only knows where in service to our country. I don't even have a proper address to send this yet, which means I don't know when or where these words may reach you or if they'll be lost along the way. Or if some stranger will stumble upon them and wonder who Jimmy Propfield is . . . not knowing he used to be my best friend.*

*Look after my little brother, please. You know very well Billy should never have been able to enlist yet. I also know he'd never have let you two go without him. I suppose you'll probably have to save Hank from himself while you're at it. You were always the responsible one.*

*Claire*

DECEMBER 7, 1941

MANILA, PHILIPPINES

I admire the new cut of my khakis in the latrine mirror, flexing just enough to test the stretch of the shirt across my shoulder blades.

I've filled out in the six months since we arrived as raw recruits. Grown half an inch too, I reckon. And even though I'm only a private, I got a fresh haircut and fifteen dollars left in my pocket after picking up my uniforms from the Chinese tailor, who was worth every penny.

The eighteen-year-old preacher's kid from Mobile, Alabama, is gone. A soldier of the Thirty-First Infantry stands in his place.

I tuck my tie into my shirt between the second and third buttons and straighten up tall. Raise my fingers to my brow in a perfect salute.

Not the same Jimmy "Propper" Propfield at all.

"Prop!" A lanky form rounds the corner. "Can we leave already?"

I drop my arm—too late. Even in my peripheral vision I can tell Billy's snickering. He gives a low whistle.

"Dang, we even wearin' the same uniform?" He looks down at himself. His shirt hangs from his shoulders, but at least he ain't the string bean he used to be. I wonder if his mama would recognize him with this much meat on his bones and without his freckles, which didn't

fade so much as the rest of his skin just finally caught up. A state track star back home in Alabama, Billy was called “the Ginger Streak” by everyone on account of his red hair. He was so fast, that’s all you’d see—a streak of ginger flying by. But the first two months here we called him the Lightning Lobster on account of his regular sunburn.

“I told you, you need to get at least one uniform cut down for parades,” I say as we head out. “You wanna move up in rank, you gotta look the part.”

Billy shrugs. “Don’t know as I care about that. ‘Sides, I think I’m still growin’.”

Given that he’s only sixteen and had to lie about his age to enlist, he’s probably right. I also know he signed to have half his pay sent home to his mama and sisters.

I turn toward Billy as we don our caps beneath an overcast Manila sky. It’s weird, him being nearly as tall as me. “Tell you what,” I say. “Tomorrow afternoon we’ll go down and get you fixed up. On me.”

“Aw, I couldn’t—”

“We’re goin’ and that’s final. Call it an early birthday present.”

“You’re a good friend, Jimmy,” Billy says. “I’m lucky to have you and Hank lookin’ out for me.”

Never mind that Hank’s version of “looking out” for Billy has been to recommend he pick up a prophylactic kit with his weekend pass if he wants to avoid the clap. Ain’t sure whether Hank learned that one the hard way since he got assigned to another company—a thing none of us was happy about until we found out his barracks was directly across from ours and that we could meet up any afternoon and head out together on pass.

Which we did, hitting town on payday to dance with the most beautiful girls I’ve ever seen at the first flashy cabaret we came to. We’d had a real good time too, first time out—before someone slipped Hank a Mickey and swiped Billy’s and my wallets. We learned real fast to stay

off the main strip on payday when the prices double, and to divide our money between our socks and pockets.

After waiting most of the day on my uniforms, Billy and me are the last ones we know to sign out. Everyone else—including Hank—left the Cuartel de España in the old walled city hours ago for Manila’s restaurants, bars, and brothels.

There are only a few hawkers left on the cobblestone street beyond the sally port. The second we emerge they swarm us with souvenirs, candy, and postcards. Kids pull at our hands and pockets, hoping for coins.

Billy produces a pack of chewing gum with mock surprise. “Say, look what I just found in my pocket!” He asks a grinning little girl, “Did you put this here?” Kids flock to him like seagulls as he gives away the pieces.

As I wait for him, an old woman with a leathery face pushes a corsage toward me, her other hand outstretched. “For your sweetheart, Joe!”

“Ma’am, when I find her, I promise to buy them all.” I press the flowers back into her palm with a ten-centavo coin. She smiles with a silent nod of thanks.

According to the news, there’s tension on these islands. Here on Luzon, especially. We’ve been gearing up for war in the Philippines now for months—the reason General MacArthur was recalled to active duty and the Army started shipping out green recruits like us to do our basic training here.

But if there’s tension, we don’t feel it. And the war in Europe might as well be a world away.

A breeze blows through the park outside the old Spanish walls as I hail a brightly painted calesa. Just this morning we were out here running drills beneath pink-flowered trees. The calesa’s driver brings the carriage to a stop and we climb in.

“The Metropolitan, please,” I say as Billy and me climb aboard. The two-wheeled cart lurches forward and the pony clip-clops down the street. I gaze out the side of the carriage as we pass the Manila Hotel,

where General MacArthur lives in a fifth-floor penthouse and officers have parties nearly every night. The portico's white columns are wound in red and green garland and I realize it's almost Christmas.

Billy starts talking about volcanoes. He's been going on and on about wanting to see one since we got here.

"We can take a bus to Lake Taal," Billy says. "There's a volcano right in the middle of the lake. Ain't that somethin'? A volcano in the middle of a lake!"

"That sounds real swell," I say before leaning forward to ask the driver, "Sir, can you take us by the Army-Navy Club?"

Billy groans. "We're gonna be late."

"No, we ain't." To the driver I say, "Is it true they got a fifty-foot-long buffet in there?"

"Buffet, yes," the man says. He's weathered and missing most of his teeth, but—like everyone else here—he smiles. "Bowling alley . . . swimming . . . restaurant . . . bar . . ."

We ride up the street, past the Army-Navy Club's tennis courts toward the university. What I ain't told anyone is that I've been looking into some courses there. Billy and Hank have already been making names for themselves on the regiment track and boxing teams since we arrived. But I was never a star athlete or fond of getting my nose broke.

So I got other plans.

Drills end at one o'clock every day on account of the heat. But while everyone else heads to the slop chute for cold beer and card playing, I'm fixing to earn me an education. By the time my tour's up, I intend to have a college degree and be lined up for a commission. I'll re-up and take out a furnished room at the Army-Navy Club. Take up tennis. Try out that fifty-foot buffet.

I glance back in time to see an officer toss the keys of his Chevy to a bellman out front of the club.

Maybe even buy me a sweet set of wheels.



But one thing I don't plan on: going back to Mobile. I was ruined for it the minute I saw the old Spanish shipwrecks in the harbor and tasted my first mango. The bells of Santo Domingo were still ringing their hellos when I swore I'd stay as long as I could. Because if this ain't paradise, I don't know what is. A place a young man like me can start fresh, prove himself, and build a future. Live like a king, even. We already eat better than we did at home and the dollar goes farther. True, there's no Crimson Tide football and I ain't seen grits or chocolate gravy. But as long as I got my two best friends, I have all I need.

The grand Metropolitan Theater looks more like a palace than a place to watch Mickey Mouse movies. *Sergeant York* just opened last night, and the line today is out the door and full of enlisted men. Billy and me get out and I pay the driver, but I don't see Hank anywhere.

"Don't tell me he ain't here," I mutter.

"Maybe he's already inside," Billy says.

I'm about to go in and look around when I hear a familiar shout farther up the street.

"Streak! Proper!" And then, with more belly, "James Pierce Prop-field!"

It's the same voice that used to yell for me to pass the football, that egged me on to victory in the only fight I ever got in without him, and that announced we were enlisting back in July.

Which is how I also know its owner is drunk.

I scan the line of cabs letting passengers off at the curb and find Hank standing beside a taxi, hands cupped around his mouth like a megaphone.

"William Miles Crockett! Billyyyy!" he calls, voice going up an octave like he's calling in pigs.

Billy grimaces. "Why's he gotta carry on like that?"

"Hurry up!" I shout, waving him over as it starts to rain. "Movie starts in fifteen minutes!"

“Forget the movie!” Hank hollers. He sticks his hands in his pockets, turns sideways, and poses like some two-bit Gary Cooper. “The three of us are celebratin’. Get over here!”

Billy jogs to the curb. Next thing I know, he’s whooping and slapping Hank on the back—I got no idea why . . .

Until I see the stiff new stripe on Hank’s sleeve. I sigh and walk over.

At first I think it’s a joke. That he must’ve stolen someone’s uniform.

But then Hank’s telling Billy thanks and grinning dimple to dimple with his chewing gum between his teeth.

Hank’s been promoted to private first class.

I clap Hank on the back as we pile into the taxi, shaking my head the entire time. Because I know Hank ain’t pulled half the guard duty Billy and me have. Those three days we spent marching one hundred miles to and from Subic Bay in the heat, Hank was chauffeuring officers around Manila in a car from the motor pool. Hank’s the last of us three I’d have guessed would get promoted and the first I’d have predicted to land in the brig.

But I’m glad for him. He’s nineteen and the oldest of us, so I guess it makes sense. Besides, Hank’s the main reason we’re here.

We hit the Silver Dollar Café first for fried chicken and local beer. By the time we land a table at our fourth bar, Hank and Billy have put away a dozen San Miguels and a couple jiggers of gin between them while I’ve nursed a series of Cokes. And because we’ve already toasted everyone from the company commander who approved Hank’s promotion to Uncle Sam, the Crimson Tide’s winning season, and Betty Grable’s legs, I finally raise my glass and say, “To Private First Class Hank Wright.”

Hank bows his head as we each take a drink.

“I got one,” Billy says. “Remember this? To . . .” He wiggles his brows and starts gassing it up so hard the next part comes out as a squeak. “*The Lady Killers!*”

I sputter and Billy nearly falls out of his chair with a howl at the name Hank and me dubbed ourselves at the start of seventh grade.

“Boy, weren’t we somethin’!” I laugh. “I got hold of my daddy’s pomade and slicked back my hair and Hank thought for sure he was sprouting a Clark Gable mustache.” I point my beer at Billy. “What were you in—sixth grade? How d’you even know about that? You know we can’t let you live.”

Hank chuckles, but he’s staring at the bottle in his hand, not saying a word.

Billy and me fall quiet.

“You got one, Hank?” Billy asks after a minute.

Hank pauses and then nods, lifting his beer, if not his head.

“To . . .” He stops. Presses his lips together. The lower one trembles.

He sets down the beer, gets up, and walks off without a name.

But we all know who he meant.

DECEMBER 8, 1941

MANILA, PHILIPPINES

**H**ank doesn't get far. He drinks at the bar by himself for over an hour while Billy and me stay at the table and order a couple rounds—my first beers of the night—and let him be. By the time Hank leaves with a two-peso girl from the brothel upstairs, it's after two in the morning.

The cigarette smoke, so thick when we got here, is finally starting to thin when a girl in a faded dress wanders over to our table.

"You want to go upstairs? Like your friend?" she asks, smiling at me. She's got smooth skin and long dark hair and can't be a day over fifteen. The first time a girl like her ever approached me at a club, I figured she might want to talk some, maybe dance a little. When I figured out what she was truly offering, I paid her a panicked peso just to get away.

The girl leans over and murmurs in my ear, "I will make you happy." Goose bumps flare down my neck as she brushes against my arm. She smells like perfume and sin, her cheek so close I can feel the heat coming off her like a fever. Her hand slips beneath the table to my thigh. I bolt up from the chair.

“Sorry.” I clear my throat. “We were just leaving.”

She turns to Billy, who sits stock-still, his eyes darting this way and that like a caged animal’s as his cheeks go up in flames. I slide her the leftover coins on the table. Rap Billy on the shoulder.

“Let’s go.”

“Should we maybe wait?” Billy asks, gaze following the girl to another table. “Make sure Hank gets back all right?”

“Hank can take care of himself.”

A big fella at the next table—a Polar Bear of the Thirty-First like us and an old-timer by the look of it—glances up from his beer as we head out past his table.

“I’ll make sure your friend stays out of trouble,” he says.

We hit the road and hoof it several blocks before finding a cab, by which time it’s after two thirty. Manila’s streets glisten like darkened mirrors after the rain as the taxi’s tires sluice through shallow puddles along the curb. The closer we get to the walled city on the bay, the breeze through the open window smells less like dank sewage and more like seawater and flowers.

“Maybe Hank’ll come down with the clap and get demoted,” Billy muses, his eyelids at half-mast.

I give a little laugh—not just because I’ve already thought that, but if there’s anyone I know who could cheat VD, it’s the newly minted Private First Class Wright.

We’ve just turned up the boulevard when the taxi driver slows, peering curiously at something through the open window. I sit up at the sight of a 1939 Chevy Master Deluxe idling on the grassy lawn outside the old Spanish walls a good twenty feet off the road. It’s one of our officers.

“Sir, can you pull over?” I say, tapping the driver’s seat. The cab stops and I get out and run over to the Chevy, slipping on the slick grass as a lieutenant I don’t recognize throws open the driver’s-side door. He

waves me off like one of the bugs swarming the headlights as I salute, peering inside the car.

“Private Propfield, sir. You all right, sir?”

“Stupid car ran off the road . . .” He stands, grabbing at the door for support, misses, and falls in slow motion onto his butt. I help him up, grimacing at the reek of whiskey on him. He’s lucky he didn’t crash his car into one of the tall palms lining the boulevard.

“We’ve got a cab, sir.” I motion over my shoulder. “Can we take you somewhere—maybe for some coffee?”

“No, no, no,” he says. I stagger as he sways, nearly dragging me back down with him. Billy runs over and helps me guide him to the front bumper, where the lieutenant takes an unsteady seat.

“Sir, I think we ought to get you home,” I say.

“Need to get to Stossenburg,” he slurs, eyelids drooping. “Been trassferred.”

“I’m sure you can take the morning train, sir,” I say, assuming he means Fort Stotsenburg a couple hours north of here. That he’s just the latest in a long list of newly appointed instructors to the local Philippine Army.

He shakes his head. “Gotta get there by morning.”

The guy can barely stand.

I return to the taxi, lean through the open window, and ask the driver, “Mister, can you take us as far as Fort Stotsenburg?”

“Too far,” the driver says, waving his hand.

“But that man’s an officer. Someone will make sure you get paid.”

“No, no.” The driver points to the clock fixed to the dash. “Too late.”

I walk back to the lieutenant.

“Sir, would you like us to drive you?” I ask.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Billy staring at me like I’m off my rocker.

The lieutenant straightens enough to dig in his pocket, and I realize he’s searching for his wallet.

“Oh, no,” I say. “Keep your money, sir—we’re glad to help.”

Billy shakes his head, but I figure if the lieutenant wants to pay us something, it’s best for all of us if he remembers it.

“Why, thass real nice,” the lieutenant says.

I flip the front seat forward, then go pay our cabdriver as Billy gets the lieutenant squared away in back. A minute later, the taxi’s turning down the boulevard, heading out of sight.

“We drivin’ him for real?” Billy asks, low.

I shrug. “I’ve only had two beers. ’Sides, what else we got to do to-night?”

“Uh, sleep?”

I glance toward the back seat of the Chevy where the lieutenant’s already passed out.

“You can sleep while I drive,” I say. “C’mon. It’s the right thing to do.”

Billy heaves a sigh. “Why you always gotta be so good, Prop?” But he gets in the car.

Truth is, I got three reasons for being willing to make the trip up to Stotsenburg and thumb it back if we have to.

One, if this officer ends up killing someone because I walked away, I reckon I’m as guilty as he is.

Two, I ain’t never driven a car this nice.

Three, this man’s an officer. He could put in a good word for us—especially if he knows we saved him from showing up late or not at all. He’s so drunk, he might’ve driven into the harbor or died in a head-on collision trying to stay on the right side of the road, which is the wrong side here. For all he knows, I just saved his life.

After all, Hank got promoted for carting a lieutenant around, and that was just in Manila.

I slide onto the upholstered seat, close the door, and take a moment to appreciate the fine steering wheel in my hands before shifting into

gear. When I touch the gas, the car lurches forward . . . and then rocks back, wheels spinning. I try again. Same thing.

Shift into reverse. No dice.

I put the car in neutral, get out, and go around back, where the wheels have torn through the damp grass and mired in the mud.

“Streak—”

“Yup,” Billy says, sliding over to the driver’s seat. He puts the car in gear and touches the gas as I shove my weight against the bumper. The wheels spin, throwing mud all over my khakis. We try again, and a third time, but this ain’t a job for one person.

I go around and lean through the car’s open window. Shake the lieutenant by the shoulder. He responds with a snore.

“Now what?” Billy asks. Palm fronds rustle overhead. The clouds have broken, stars crisp in the sky. I can just make out the faint sound of laughter drifting from the Manila Hotel’s outdoor bar.

“Stay here,” I say, figuring there’s got to be a bellboy or two still on duty who’ll be glad to push us out for half a peso each.

I scrape my soles off on the curb and am just striking out across the boulevard when a pair of headlights comes from the south. I hurry toward the oncoming lane, waving my arms. The car—a brightly colored taxi—slows to a stop.

The driver leans out his window. “What you need, Joe?”

“Can you help give us a push?” I gesture toward the Chevy.

The back door opens and someone gets out, shouting, “What the Sam Hill—you steal a car, Prop?”

And there’s Hank—rumpled and flushed, but cleaner than me.

“How’re you back already?” I squint at him.

“I try to leave before they fall in love.” Hank grins. “It don’t always work.”

Within minutes, Hank, the taxi driver, and me are pushing the car



out, yelling for Billy to keep going as he drives over the low curb and onto the road with a scrape.

“So where we goin’?” Hank asks.

I climb into the driver’s seat as Billy gets in back. “Stotsenburg.”

As we leave Manila, Hank’s singing “Pennsylvania 6-5000,” shouting it out the window until Billy’s staring straight ahead, stone-faced in the rearview mirror like he’s about to snap. I can’t even look at him without busting out laughing.

Almost feels like old times.

Ten minutes later, Billy’s asleep in the back seat with his mouth open, head bobbing with each bump in the road, and Hank’s pinching the bridge of his nose like he’s trying to stay awake. The next time I glance over, Hank’s chin is on his chest.

Not only am I *not* tired, I’m more energized than I’ve felt all night. Captivated by the hum of the Chevy’s engine against a silence filled with sound—the scrape of insects, the wind whispering from the forested hills, the barking dog a barrio over. The island at this hour feels wild, peaceful, and dangerous all at once. Like one of Billy’s dormant volcanoes on the verge of a waking rumble.

Much as I don’t miss home, I wish my mama could see this place. She’d love the big porches running along the upper floors of our barracks, the blooming vines just like the bougainvillea she grows along the back fence of our yard. I wrote her a letter just to let her know we’re living better than could ever be asked—from the roast beef and Parker rolls we eat at supper to the locals we each pay a few dollars a month to work the kitchen, clean our equipment, and make our beds. That I plan to start school. That the people here are kind and friendly. I wonder if she likes the pearl I sent her wrapped in a square of silk for her birthday. She always said they were her favorite.

I don’t have to wonder what my daddy would say. I bought the pearl from a Moro—a Mohammedan. The university ain’t seminary. And

anyone who can afford servants obviously ain't giving enough to the poor.

In the end, I never sent that letter to Mama. Only a pressed sprig of bougainvillea with a line to say all was well.

The only thing I wish I had right now is a cold drink. Especially when I pull over to let a convoy of military vehicles pass. The dust of their wake billows in through the windows. I wonder where they're headed at this hour.

When I get back on the road, the birds are singing, and by the time we reach San Fernando, the eastern sky's tinged the color of denim. I spy a small bakery with its lights on and pull in. Leaving the others asleep in the car, I get out and peer through the shop's window. Dance music drifts from a radio inside, a female figure swaying in the kitchen behind the counter as she kneads a mound of dough. I rap softly, and then wave when I catch the Filipina's attention. She wipes her hands and gestures me to come in like I'm the next-door neighbor.

"You open this early, ma'am?" I say, stepping inside. The smell of baking bread envelops me.

"For our American soldier friend, yes," she smiles, turning the radio down as the announcer comes on. She looks to be in her thirties, with wide-set eyes and a seam above her lip that hitches up her smile. It don't make her any less pretty. In fact, I think she's the most beautiful older woman I ever met. She gives me samples of buttery pastries and sweet rolls covered in dusty crumbs and others filled with cheese and sprinkled with coconut. I could stay here all morning trying everything in the shop, I'm so hungry and it all tastes so good.

I leave with a bag of warm empanadas and a six-pack of orange drinks. Guzzle the first one before reaching the edge of Angeles City. Give myself just long enough to eat an empanada and gaze out at the rice paddies reflecting the red tinge of dawn before I wake the others.

We pass the front gate of Fort Stotsenburg just before 6:00 a.m. and

slowly move through the base. The lieutenant, when Billy prods him awake, is so green around the gills I wonder if he might puke in his own back seat.

“Drink, sir?” I say, offering a bottle over my shoulder.

He takes it, murmurs his thanks, chugs half of it down, and holds the back of his hand to his mouth as though to make sure it stays in.

“You boys with the Thirty-First, I gather,” he says at last, leaning forward to point me past a half-empty motor pool toward the parade grounds.

“Yes, sir.” I hear a bugle in the distance and pull over for reveille. We all pile out to face the music. It’s the fastest I’ve seen the lieutenant move since we found him.

“I owe you one, fellas,” he says afterward, in the front seat. “If you’ll park at that post command building, I can take it from here.”

Unlike the Cuartel de España in Manila’s old walled city, Fort Stotsenburg looks like a boomtown with its railway station, horse stables, and hospital. The place must be bursting at the seams; in addition to the barracks and large frame houses, I note several rows of tents to the west, on the opposite end from the runways and control tower of the adjacent Clark Field.

The relaxed atmosphere I’ve grown accustomed to in the Philippines don’t exist here. Privates hurry between bamboo buildings. Jeeps crowd Officers’ Row. The sun ain’t even fully crested the mountain to the east, which Billy’s informed me twice is a bona fide volcano, and men are hurrying toward the officers’ mess like they might run out of eggs.

I park and hand over the keys as we get out. Watch as an officer dashes from a headquarters building toward a jeep idling by the curb. A second later it speeds toward Clark Field.

“If you fellas hang tight for a bit, I’ll see about getting you a ride back to Manila,” the lieutenant says. He walks off, mumbling under his breath, “What’s all this commotion?”

We stand there waiting while everyone rushes around us. Near the bivouac area, enlisted men come and go from a kitchen truck, mess kits in hand.

“What d’you think our chances are of getting fed?” Billy says. “I could’ve eaten three more of those empanadas.”

I ain’t exactly full myself.

“Why don’t you go over there to that line and see if you can scare up some biscuits,” Hank says.

Billy never argues, especially when it comes to food. A second later, he’s jogging off to investigate.

As good as food sounds, the thought of sleep seems even better. I can feel the night finally catching up to me, putting lead in my limbs.

“I can’t believe that lieutenant didn’t offer to pay you,” Hank says. “Did he even ask what happened to your trousers?”

I glance down at the mud splattered across my khakis. Start to say the lieutenant tried to pay and that I should’ve taken him up on it but stop as Billy comes sprinting toward us, his eyes wide.

“They bombed us!” he shouts before he’s even reached us. “They bombed Pearl Harbor—America’s at war!”

We stare at him like he’s lost his marbles. And then Hank busts out laughing.

Billy blinks, breathing hard. “I’m tellin’ the truth! Every guy in that line’s sayin’ so—they’re about to make an announcement!”

I don’t know what’s more shocking: seeing the Ginger Streak out of breath or the thought of anyone taking a swing at us on American soil.

Hank stands there like he’s waiting for the punch line. When it don’t come, he narrows his eyes. “What’re you talking about, son?”

“Japan attacked the United States!” Billy says, enunciating each word like we’re dopes.

“When?” I ask. We were in Manila all night. The news would’ve been everywhere.

“Just now!” Billy says, throwing up his arms.

Hank snaps into gear and intercepts a sergeant coming across the parade grounds. “Is it true there’s a war and we’re missing it?”

“That’s what they’re saying,” the sergeant says, not slowing. “There’s a radio in the supply office where I’m headed if you want to hear for yourself.”

We follow him into a bamboo building, remove our caps, and join a group of men crowded around a radio in the back room. It takes me a minute to realize they’re listening to Don Bell on KZRH Radio Manila, same as we listen to. But this ain’t the same bombastic Don Bell. He’s breathing fast and sounds like he might be crying as he announces Imperial Japan has bombed Pearl Harbor.

*Reports remain sketchy, but there is no doubt! Oh God! They hit our ships at anchor!*

I try to make sense of what I’m hearing.

Hank shakes his head, jaw tight.

“How is that even possible?” someone asks, glancing around.

“I don’t get it,” another man says. “Why attack Hawaii when we got bombers right here, this close to their bases on Formosa?”

“I thought they only had wooden propeller planes,” Billy whispers. “Like the kind wing walkers do stunts on.”

I’d heard that too.

The sergeant gestures us outside.

“You fellas with the Thirty-First?” he says out on the sidewalk, nodding toward the patch on my sleeve.

“Yes, Sergeant,” I say, replacing my cap. “Drove an officer in this morning.”

“If you want to get back to your unit, you better go now,” he says, jerking his chin toward the way we came in. He lowers his voice. “I got

a buddy in the Twentieth Pursuit Squadron over there at Clark Field who wrote up his will two days ago after a briefing.” He points to the airstrip. “See the pilots waiting in those Warhawks? They been on the line since the middle of the night. You know what that tells me?”

He don’t need to say it. I can feel Billy looking between us as the heat leaves my face.

Formosa’s less than five hundred miles to the north, and the fleet in Hawaii can’t protect us.

On Clark Field’s dusty runway, our first plane growls toward the sky.