

# **GROUND ZERO**

**By Maisy Harrison**

## **Chapter 1**

**31<sup>st</sup> July 1945**

Dear Mom,

Thank you for the letter; it's always great to hear from you and makes you feel close by. I'm very glad to hear of John's promotion to flight sergeant, but still sad that I will never get to fly a plane. Stupid eyes! Still, I hope he is successful in his training. Things here are going well, and the chief air marshal is very pleased with my progress, especially since I am the youngest here. My radio operation training has been rewarding so far, and I am thoroughly enjoying it. They treat us well, and the food is decent, but not as good as your chicken pie back home. The air field base is very isolated – it feels like we're in the middle of nowhere. I would like to say that I haven't felt homesick, but unfortunately, I can't help missing you all! I so desperately wish to be there with you. Thanks very much for the Lucky Strikes, the crew and I are all enjoying them! Speaking of the crew, my good friend Paul has very kindly been teaching me to speak German! I'm not vry good but am hoping to improve in time.

Even more exciting news – we've been given an important mission today! It's confidential so I can't tell you much, but I am immensely excited and hope I will make you proud, like John. I am truly hoping this mission will bring an end to the war, as I am longing to come home more and more each day. Yesterday, one of the US navy ships, USS Indianapolis, was sunk by a Japanese submarine. Many of the men drowned, so I don't know what this means for us, but hopefully it won't affect our mission.

I hope Amy is still doing well at school, Dad told me how much her teacher loves her! I wish I had concentrated more at school, I might have learned something! I came across this great ration recipe book at the base. There was a great recipe for toad in the hole that reminded me of home. I trust that you are coping with the lack of supplies. I am pleased to hear that Grandpa's leg is getting better – do you think he will be out of bed in the next couple of weeks?

Wish me luck on my mission – I hope to see you very soon.

Your loving son,

Richard.

## Chapter 2

4<sup>th</sup> August 1945

Hurrying down the road, Sakura clutches her school bag and once again pats the sack of rice to ensure that no precious grains have escaped from the small hole at the bottom. The sun is high and beats down on her head as she ducks into the protective shade of the cherry blossom trees. As she approaches the market, she sees the bare stalls and tattered awnings which were once thriving with life and colour. She longs for the days after the war when the market is filled with fresh tuna and pufferfish once more. She can almost taste the sweet raspberry pancakes that her mother used to make. How she wishes she could take home the fresh miso soup her father used to love. It would be sure to cheer him up, after the death of his brother during the recent blitz in Tokyo.

Sakura yearns for all the death and destruction to end, as she hopes to start training as a teacher soon. She wishes to help young girls with their education, so they have a chance of a better life after the war. She knows that the emperor will keep their city safe and is glad that her father is working in the ammunition factory to help the war effort. The sound of laughter catches her attention, and she looks over to see a small girl chasing a dog. Sakura can't help but think of her younger sister, Airi, who has been sent away to the countryside for safety. She wonders how she is coping away from home and hopes for her prompt return. A group of soldiers casually stand on the street corner, smoking. Their glazed eyes follow her down the road, slinging her low looks. The low hum of bomber planes in the distance makes her stomach churn.

She reaches the river and casts aside any bad thoughts of her sister, to avoid missing her too much. The river is murky and polluted from the many ships taking soldiers to and from the harbour. Striding round the river bend, Sakura recognises the colourful bunting outside her house and can smell the familiar fumes of boiled yams drifting through the window. She passes the black pine tree – a glorious sanctuary, under which she has spent many happy hours reading. Without warning, her mother's voice comes hollering out the window. "Where have you been? Quickly with the rice, we need to get dinner ready."

## Chapter 3

**5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> August 1945**

Richard peers through the cockpit window, and through the clouds he spots the coastline of Japan. By the time they reach Iwo Jima, the rising sun is casting a magnificent array of colours across the sky. It had been a long and cramped journey since leaving Tinian five and a half hours earlier. The 10 man crew had come out to the tarmac that night to find the surrounding area bombarded with officers and scientists, the darkness repeatedly broken by the flash of photographers' cameras. The crew had been advised to get some sleep, but who could? With his adrenaline rushing, Richard had passed the time by playing Black Jack and sharing his Lucky Strikes with the rest of the crew.

Initially, they had flown low. There was little talking aboard the plane, as the crew had been ordered to stay off the intercom. Richard had radioed the base to keep them informed of their position, while the plane had begun a gentle ascent, reaching about 31,000 feet in the sky. They had passed over the island of Shikoku, and fifty miles away, the crew had a clear view of the city.

What catches Richard's attention is the voice of the navigator, Mr Tibbets. He sits in the plane's nose and spots the city's centre. "I got it" he calmly announces. With three minutes to go, Mr Tibbets begins counting down to his crew. He marks off two minutes, then one, 30 seconds, then 15. Then, speaking through a microphone, he announces the final countdown, "10, 9, 8, 7 ..."

When the bomb explodes, an intense light fills the cabin, lighting up the sky. Within seconds, the plane jumps and makes a sound like metal snapping. There is a burst of exhilaration from the crew with cheering and clapping that shortly follows. Richard composes himself, switches on the radio and reports back to base: "This is the Enola Gay. Our mission has been successful."

## Chapter 4

6<sup>th</sup> August 1945

Sakura stands at the table dishing out portions of rice into four bowls and checks the clock. Ten past eight. She calls to her brother: "Riku, come quickly, we're going to be late." He silently strolls into the room and sits down with his chopsticks without even saying good morning. They hastily shovel the rice into their mouths while their mother pours tea into their mugs. Outside, they hear the familiar rattle of their father's bike as he leaves for work. At quarter past eight, Riku stands up and starts cramming books into his school bag as Sakura helps her mother clear away the dishes.

They are very aware of the aircraft noises but the one they hear at this moment sounds slightly different. It shortly fades away. Abruptly, there is a moment of blinding light and intense heat. The roof, walls, ceiling, everything collapses; they are buried in complete darkness. Sakura briefly loses consciousness, and when she comes back, all she can see is the grey sky above her. She clings to her brother and they try to climb out. She thinks she can hear people screaming, but realises the noise is coming from her own mouth. She frantically looks around for her mother and finds her in what is left in the kitchen. She is covered in blood. The three slowly walk away from their flattened house, stunned. The black pine tree is now somehow even blacker, stripped of its beauty and grace. They can see Hiroshima centre on the horizon, orange and twisted, a large mushroom cloud circling it.

Sakura is painfully worried about her father but hesitates to accept that he is dead. Turning around, she sees him stumbling towards them, his face a deep glowing red. She realises that he has been burnt. Dazed and confused, the four make their way towards the river near their house. Ghost-like people crowd around the water. Some are naked, their clothes burnt off, and some have scorched flesh hanging from their arms. No one speaks. The skin on some people is dark red, clearly burned and painful. Corpses of people and animals float eerily in the water. Files of people are heading away from the city. Sakura sees a mother carrying a baby on her back, who is obviously dead. Its head is lolling, its mouth open. Another child whimpers beside a woman lying on the ground, covered in blood. They all keep slowly walking, uncomprehending of what has happened. And when they come to, all they can hear is the desperate gasps of a dying city, the silence of a dying war.

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