CHAPTER ONE

THE DAY MY LIFE CHANGED FOREVER

I will always remember the day my life changed forever.

It was a typical Sunday morning. My brother Yoneichi and I quickly walked through a light rain to get to the local Methodist Church. As usual, we arrived early. We dusted the pews in the small country church and distributed church **hymnals** and bulletins as people arrived.

That December morning my brother and I were happy. We knew all the people in the church, and we always looked forward to singing the familiar hymns and feeling a part of the congregation. The Sunday service was in English so my parents didn't attend. Instead, they would attend services in Japanese, held in their living room whenever a Japanese Methodist minister visited our community.

After church that day, my brother and I wished everyone a good week ahead and left for home. As we walked, I studied the Bible verse I had received and repeated it until I memorized it for next Sunday. That would be my last carefree morning, preoccupied with all the interests and worries of a sixteen-year-old American teenager.

We had a happy simple life growing up on a rural island called Vashon, just a fifteen-minute ferryboat ride from Seattle, Washington. My life in that beautiful setting was one of innocence and pleasure. I was just one of the island kids. I attended Vashon Grade School with eight grades in one building. Each teacher taught two different classes in the same room.

My parents, Heisuke and Mitsuno Matsuda, had a small berry farm on Vashon Island. We were one of the thirty-seven Japanese-American families living there. My parents worked long days in the berry fields to make a living for their family. They decided to raise their two children on Vashon because they wanted to protect us from the corrupting influences of life in the city.

But nothing could protect us from the events that would soon follow.

When we got to our house, we cheerfully announced our arrival. My father, whom we always called Papa-san, was sitting at the kitchen table. Normally, Papa-san would have been working outdoors, only returning to the house when lunch was ready. That day, he looked different. His eyes were downcast and he was silent.

Our mother, Mama-san, always greeted us with a smile whenever we came home. But that day, she looked pale as she leaned against the kitchen counter and stared out the window.

"Papa-san, why are you home early?" my brother asked.

When there was no response, Yoneichi's wide smile vanished. His eyes darted back and forth between Papa-san and Mama-san. Then he turned to our mother.

"Mama-san, is something wrong? What's going on?"

I put my things down, suddenly frightened. I had never seen this look on my father's face. I wondered, *Why won't they look at us?*

After a long silence, Papa-san looked up and answered quietly in Japanese. "Mr. Yabu called. Japanese airplanes bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii early this morning."

Yoneichi whirled around and snapped on the radio. We didn't have to wait long. The booming voice of an urgent reporter burst out the news of the bomb attack. We listened with horror as he hurriedly spit out information about the heavy losses sustained by the United States Navy.

We all stared at the radio in stunned silence.

This can't be, I thought. *There must be some mistake.*

I didn't want to hear about all the ships that had been hit or that more American servicemen had been killed. But the radio announcer's loud, blaring voice kept interrupting the scheduled programs with more news about the attack.

After awhile, I turned away from the radio and looked at my parents. They understood enough English to grasp the meaning of this announcement. Papa-san's head dropped to his chest, and his shoulders slumped forward. He looked defeated.

Little did we know that Sunday afternoon how much our lives would change, but Papa-san knew enough to be afraid. He realized what could happen if people turned against us because we were Japanese.

Some forty years earlier, shortly after Papa-san's arrival in the United States, my father and several other Japanese men were working in the coalmines in the Alaskan Klondike. One day, a white friend warned my father, "Harry, there's a bunch of guys who don't like you fellows and they are planning to raid your camp tonight. You'd better get out of town right away."

The Japanese men scrambled to gather their things, hurriedly broke up camp, left their jobs, and escaped before the angry mob arrived. Papa-san told me, "I'm grateful for the friendship of some of the *hakujin* (white men). They saved our lives."

When Papa-san told us about this incident, he also described learning first hand about prejudice against people because of the color of their skin or because of the way they looked. He told Yoneichi and me how important it was to develop good relationships with everyone wherever we went.

Now, we realized all those good relationships with our neighbors and business associates would be tested.

Mama-san had been cooking fried chicken for our Sunday meal, but now it was set aside and forgotten in the midst of the unfolding crisis. She was the perfect Japanese wife—obedient and devoted. Ordinarily, Mama-san was lighthearted, gracious, and very practical about life. Today was different.

Now, her eyes filled with tears as she sank into the chair, whispering in Japanese, "This is terribly distressing. What will happen to us?"

Yoneichi and I looked at each other, stunned. We still couldn't believe what was being said on the radio. I thought, *This can't really be happening. Are they insane coming thousands of miles from Japan to attack United States territory? Why did they do this?*

Even though Papa-san had lived in America since 1898, and Mama-san since 1922, they could not become **naturalized citizens.** Many Western states, led by California, had enacted laws that prohibited Japanese arriving from Japan from becoming U.S. citizens. There were also "Anti-alien land laws" that prohibited Japanese from buying and owning land. Similar laws were enacted against the Chinese. These anti-Asian laws were the result of white Americans' fears and prejudices toward Asian immigrants.

We had lived in our home for eleven years, had friendly relationships with our neighbors, and participated in the Vashon community. Still, my parents had no guarantees for their safety because the United States government considered them "aliens." Yoneichi and I had been born in the United States, which made us

American citizens. We were *sure* our citizenship would protect us, but still, we were afraid.

A big knot doubled, then tripled in the pit of my stomach. I was afraid for my family—and for the world. I had a gnawing feeling of guilt because I was Japanese. I didn't want to think about the possibility that American people would consider me as the enemy.

I picked up our cat, Kitty, and sat down on a kitchen chair. Repeatedly, I stroked Kitty's lean silky body and held her close. Our dog, Frisky, sensed something was wrong. He stood nearby and stared at me with his searching gaze. I patted his head and rubbed his ears. In turn, Frisky licked my hand and comforted me as he leaned his body against my legs.

We couldn't stop listening to the radio reports. Yoneichi kept going outdoors, searching the sky for planes. Whenever my brother sat down, his right leg nervously jiggled up and down, unable to contain himself. He kept rubbing his neck as though he had a pain there.

What could my brother possibly be thinking? I wondered.

Yoneichi was a recent high school graduate and was working on the family farm while he thought about his future. Now, his future seemed suspended.

We spent the rest of the day near each other, tense and silent. Radio reports brought more bad news—additional ships destroyed, growing casualties, more disasters wrought. In the end, we would learn that about 2,400 people were killed from the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

In time, we all went outdoors and kept looking at the sky for planes, unable to listen any longer to the radio reports of devastating news. That night, we had very little appetite for dinner and we stayed up later than usual. Each of us spent a restless night.

December 7, 1941, was the day my life changed forever. This was the day the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt,

called "a date which will live in **infamy**." The next day the United States declared war against Japan. On December 11, the United States also declared war against Germany and Italy, two countries that had joined forces with Japan to create the Axis powers. The United States joined other countries called the Allies, in order to fight and stop the Axis powers from invading other countries.

The day Japan bombed Pearl Harbor was also the last day I felt truly American, even though I had been born in the United States. For the rest of my life, I would struggle with the consequences of this day of infamy.

MARY MATSUDA GRUENEWALD COLLECTION

Mitsuno and Heisuke Matsuda, Mary's parents. The photo was taken in 1922 shortly after Heisuke returned to the United States from Japan with his bride.