

Chapter 1



READY FOR BATTLE

December 5, 1941

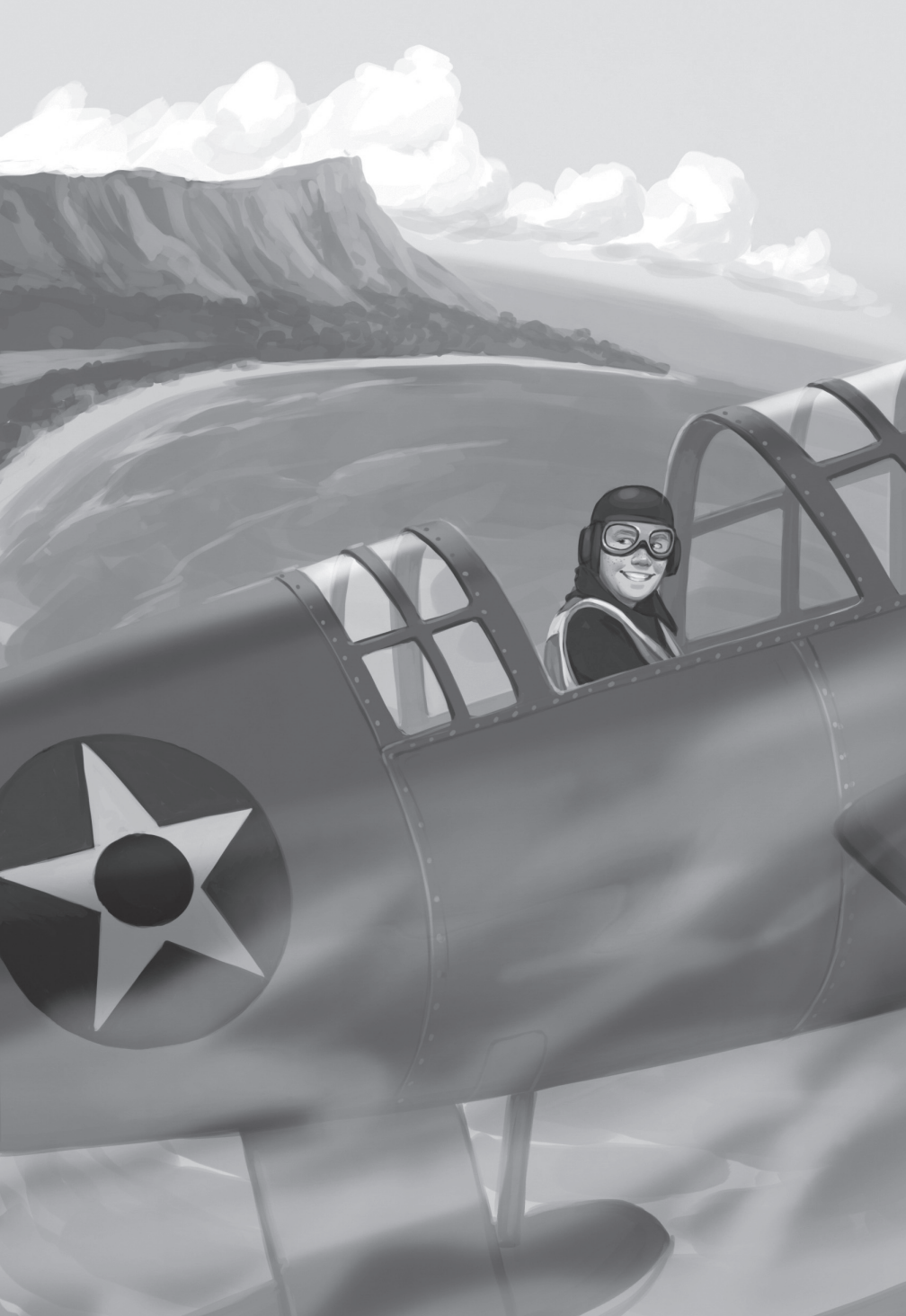
Ben Hansen looked out over the Hawaiian shoreline from the seat of a Kingfisher seaplane. Back home in Minnesota, December meant ice, snow, and air so cold it took your breath away. But here at Pearl Harbor, nearly every day was sunny. In less than a year, the island of Oahu had come to feel like home — but with much more pleasant weather!

Ben loved looking out at Pearl Harbor, where the US Navy's Pacific Fleet was

stationed — more than a hundred vessels, including eight huge battleships. He loved the flurry of activity along the docks of Battleship Row. He loved the sparkling Pacific Ocean and the gentle winds that rustled the palm trees of nearby Waikiki Beach. That's where he'd spend his day off tomorrow.

For now, though, there was work to do. Ben checked his instruments and sent an update to the pilot in the front seat. Ben was a radio-man who flew scouting missions along with the Kingfisher pilots. They'd launch from their battleship, the USS *Arizona*, and soar over the Pacific.

It was Ben's job to navigate and communicate with the ship. He took care of all the electronics on the plane, too. When it was time to return to the USS *Arizona*, the seaplane would land in the waves and maneuver into position. Ben would need to grab a hook



dangling from the battleship's big crane, and he had to be fast! Sometimes, the waves threatened to tip him into the sea. But Ben was an expert with the hook. He'd snatch it out of the air and attach it to the plane so the crane could lift them back onto the ship.

Today, there was no need for that. The USS *Arizona* was in the harbor, so instead of landing at sea, the Kingfisher touched down on the runway at Ford Island.

"Got plans for your day of liberty tomorrow?" Ben asked Tom, the plane's pilot, as they headed back to the ship.

"Going into Honolulu to buy a Christmas gift for my girl back home," said Tom.

"I want to find something nice for my mother and sisters," Ben said. His two younger sisters lived with his mother, a librarian, back in St. Paul. They both had blond hair and freckles, like he did. Ben's father had died a

long time ago, when he was very small, so his mother worked hard to take care of the family. As soon as he turned seventeen, Ben had signed up for the navy so he could help out. And he had to admit, he had done it for the travel, too. He'd always wanted to see some of the faraway places he'd read about in the stories his mother shared.

Each night before Ben went to sleep in his hammock, he'd take out a poem he kept tucked in his pocket. His mother had copied it onto a card for him and laminated it so it would last longer. The poem was from Ben's favorite book, *When We Were Very Young*. His mother had read it every night when he was growing up.

*Little Boy kneels at the foot of the bed,
Droops on the little hands little gold head.
Hush! Hush! Whisper who dares!
Christopher Robin is saying his prayers.*

Ben held the poem in his hands. The words, penned in his mother's handwriting, made her feel closer. He still read them to himself every night before he went to sleep.

After breakfast the next morning, Ben took a small boat to shore with some friends and caught a ride into town. It was December sixth — less than twenty days until Christmas! He couldn't decide on gifts for his family, but he bought some holiday cards to send home.

Ben and the other servicemen had lunch at the Black Cat Café. Ben brought along a rubber spider he'd picked up at the general store and dropped it on his friend Jerry's hamburger while he wasn't looking. The poor guy jumped about a mile when he saw it. But then he laughed.

"Every day is April Fools' Day when your name is Ben Hansen," Jerry said.

After lunch, Ben and his friends split up.

Jerry and Chow were in the USS *Arizona's* band. Jerry was an ace at clarinet. Chow (short for Chowhound, because he loved to eat) was the best French horn player around. They wanted to be early for the Battle of Music, a competition of the ships' bands at Bloch Arena that night. Everyone would be there! But Ben and his other friends took a few more hours to enjoy the beach. They stretched out in the sand and rode the waves until the sun sank low in the sky.

They caught a ride back to Pearl Harbor in time to hear the bands. Ben didn't play an instrument, but he loved tapping his feet to the music. He hummed along to "There'll Be Some Changes Made" and "Georgia on My Mind." At the end of the night, he watched the jitterbug contest. A little girl who'd come to see the bands with her father stole the show, dancing with a sailor from the USS *Tennessee*.

It was after midnight when Ben returned to the ship and climbed into his hammock. He'd be back on duty in the morning. Even on free days, it was hard to forget the fleet's mission in Hawaii. President Roosevelt had sent them here because of threats from Japan. Some people were even saying the Japanese might attack the fleet!

The rumors made Ben wonder. The American navy was the best of the best. They were skilled. They were well trained. They were prepared for anything. Ben couldn't imagine the Japanese would dare to think about an attack. But if they did, he and his fellow servicemen would be ready.