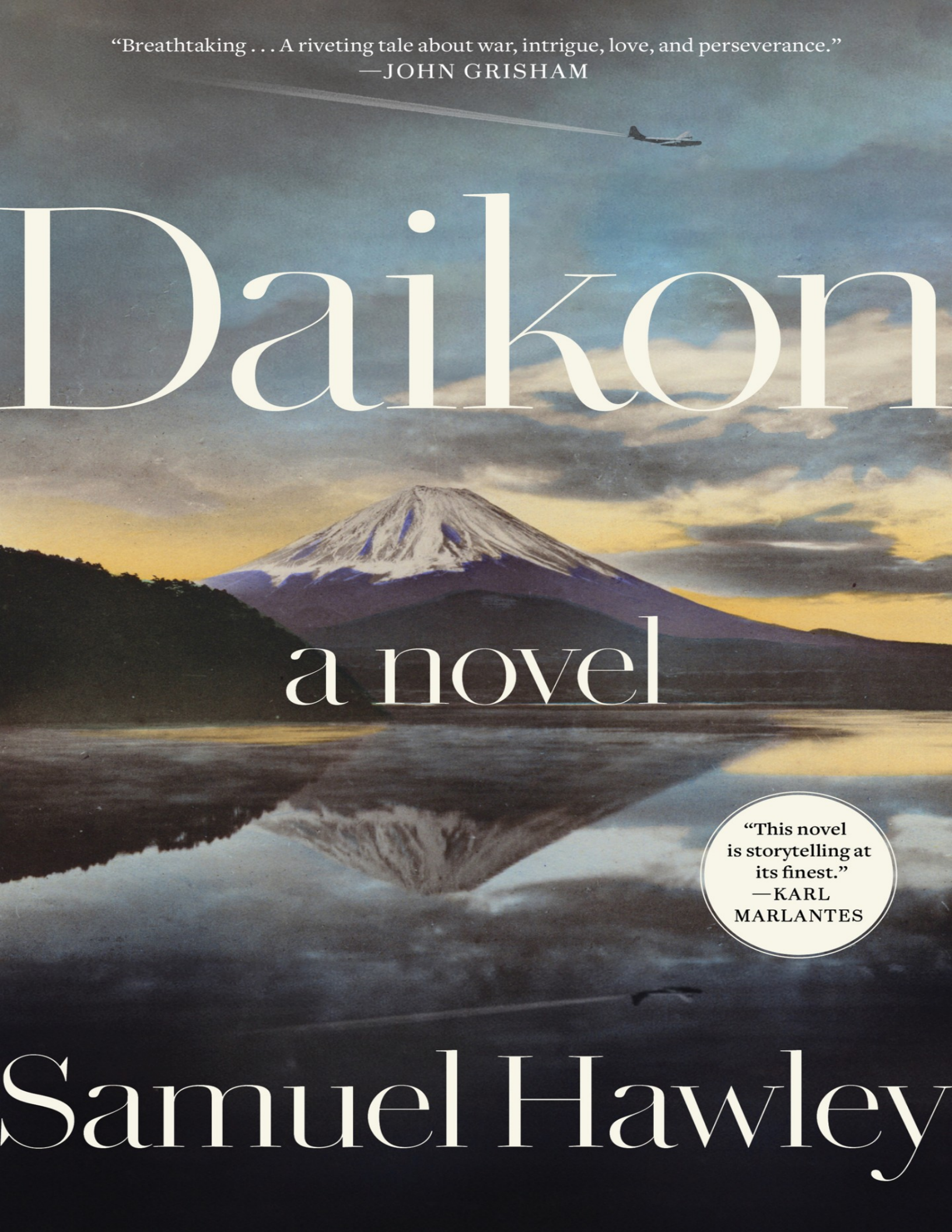
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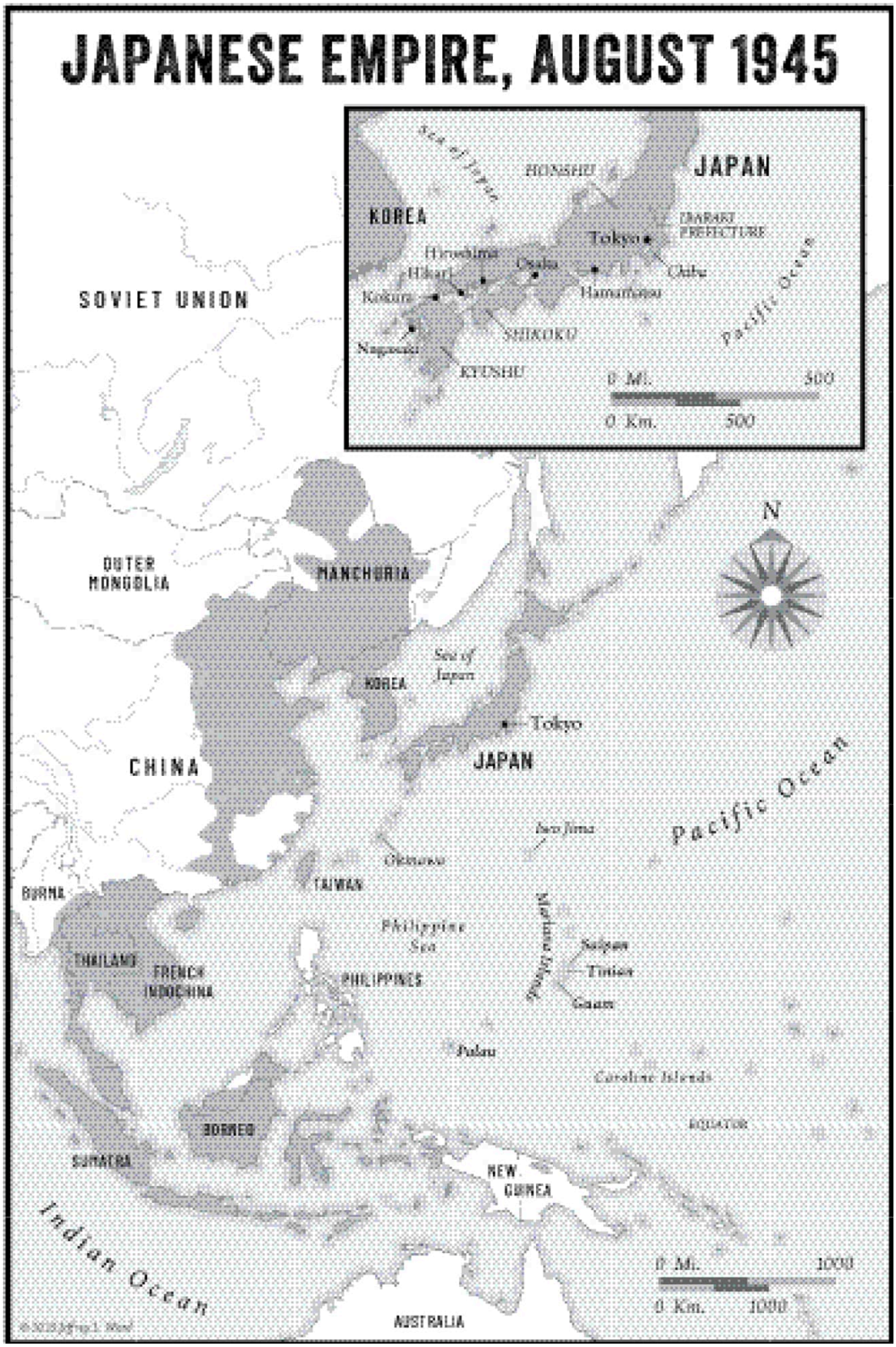
JAPANESE EMPIRE, AUGUST 1945
Sea of Japan
HONSHU
JAPAN
KOREA
IBARAKI PREFECTURE
Tokyo
Hiroshima
Osaka
Chiba
Hikari
Hamamatsu
Kokura
Nagasaki
SHIKOKU
KYUSHU
pacific Ocean
0 Mi. 500
0 Km. 500
SOVIET UNION
OUTER MONGOLIA
MANCHURIA
KOREA
Sea of Japan
Tokyo
JAPAN
CHINA
N
pacific Ocean
Iwo Jima
Okinawa
TAIWAN
BURMA
Philippine Sea
Mariana Islands
Saipan
Tinian
Guam
THAILAND
FRENCH INDOCHINA
PHILIPPINES
Palau
Caroline Islands
EQUATOR
BORNEO
SUMATRA
NEW GUINEA
Indian Ocean
AUSTRALIA
0 Mi. 1000
0 Km. 1000

Description 1

To the memory of my mother, Anne Hawley, who helped me to read

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

THE ATOMIC BOMB DROPPED ON Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, was code-named Little Boy. Its design—one mass of enriched uranium fired into another using what was essentially a gun—was relatively crude, especially in comparison to the bomb that destroyed Nagasaki three days later, which used a sphere of plutonium and a much more complex implosion triggering system.

While the design of Little Boy was simple, the 64 kilograms of uranium it contained was not. This material was so profoundly difficult to produce that virtually every book on the subject asserts that the bomb took all the uranium the United States had enriched up to that time. But according to a document at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, where the work took place, "Beta Calutron Operations, June 24, 1944–May 4, 1947," significantly more uranium than 64 kilos was enriched prior to August 1945.

This enriched uranium was so precious that it was transported across the Pacific to Tinian Island in multiple shipments, lest it be lost. Half of it was sent by air on three C-54 Skymaster transports that arrived on Tinian on July 28—reportedly the only cargo aboard, 20-odd pounds in aircraft designed to carry 14 tons. The rest of the uranium and a crate containing the bomb were sent by sea on the USS *Indianapolis* and reached Tinian on July 26. A memorandum regarding this *Indianapolis* shipment ("Transportation of Critical Shipments," Major J. A. Derry to Admiral W. S. DeLany, August 17, 1945) refers to a heavy lead bucket containing the uranium and a crate just large enough to accommodate the 10-foot-long, 28-inch-wide bomb. Eyewitness accounts, however, suggest that there may have been more. Some crewmen remembered seeing not one bucket being carried aboard, but two. Others recalled the crate as being significantly larger. Lieutenant Lewis Haynes, medical officer aboard the *Indianapolis*, remembered it as "almost the size of this room."

Despite these inconsistencies in the historical record, the United States government has always asserted that only one Little Boy uranium bomb was delivered to Tinian in late July 1945.

PROLOGUE

THEY JOINED THE LINE OUTSIDE the Warfield Theater, a man and a woman. The picture was *Camille,* starring Greta Garbo and Robert Taylor, "the most poignant love story ever told," according to the ad in the paper. It had not been his choice. He would have preferred to see Gary Cooper in *The Plainsman*. He liked Westerns. They were easier to understand. But she wanted to see *Camille,* and he wanted to please her. So he had taken the bus across the Bay Bridge and met her outside the Warfield for the six-thirty show.

The news from home wasn't good. It had been on the front page of the *Tribune* that very morning when he checked the time for the show: "Japan Cabinet Forced to Quit." The militarists were taking over. He would be returning to a Japan that was heading toward war. Would he be going alone? Or would she...

He glanced at her. She smiled back—the smile that never failed to flutter his heart, that promised to fill the void inside him that he now knew was there. How was he going to tell her? How was he going to express these feelings that were so overwhelming he didn't know how to put them into words?

They were almost to the ticket window. It was flanked by a life-size advertisement for the film, the two stars locked in a passionate embrace, *Camille* in red, the words encircled in lights: "Garbo Loves Taylor!"

Garbo loves Taylor.

It's so easy in the movies, he thought as they entered the theater.

. . .

She cried when Garbo died in Taylor's arms at the end and was still dabbing at her eyes as they left the theater, he walking her home. They continued in silence past City Hall.

Then they were turning north on her street, and he knew he had no more than ten minutes left.

He began to walk more slowly, tension starting to build in his stomach.

He stopped.

She said, “Are you all right?”

He looked into her eyes, desperate.

“I...”

Nothing more came out. He struggled to get past the blockage, to kick it down, to get around it. He had to let her know or he would be returning to Japan alone. And that surely would kill him.

“I...”

His shoulders subsided. His eyes dropped to the ground. And then a thought came into his head and before he could reconsider he blurted out:

“Taylor loves Garbo!”

A look of surprise on her face, softening to a smile of understanding. She knew.

She wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder.

“And Garbo loves Taylor,” she whispered.

And they kissed.

ONE

MAJOR EDWARD T. HOUSEMAN LEFT HIS barracks tent at 8th Avenue and 125th Street—the Columbia University district—and headed down the crushed coral roadway in the direction of Times Square. It was eleven o'clock at night and a half-moon was rising, painting the island bluish gray. He passed a row of Quonset huts on his left, backed by miles of runways for the B-29s. To his right lay the sea and the beach where he liked to go swimming. Up ahead: the high point of the island, a hill known as Mount Laso, where stranded Japanese soldiers were still hiding in caves. One of them could be out there in the darkness right now, prowling for food or an American to attack. It was a popular off-duty outing with some of the boys to pack a lunch and load up the rifles and go hunting for them.

The major turned right onto Broadway. He had chuckled at his first sight of all these New York–style street signs when the 509th Composite Group arrived on Tinian Island back in June. They had been the idea of some joker in the engineer corps who had observed that Tinian was shaped like Manhattan and that the roads should be accordingly named. That was back when Houseman was just one part of the 509th team, nothing but a cog in the wheel. He didn't feel like that any longer. And the signs didn't amuse him. The meeting at the base hospital a few hours before had dropped what seemed like the weight of the whole world onto his shoulders.

It had taken place at the bedside of the 509th's ailing commander, Colonel Paul Tibbets. Brigadier General Thomas Farrell, deputy to Manhattan Project head General Leslie Groves, was also present. Together they had filled Houseman in on what he needed to know, starting with the closely guarded secret that the weapon the 509th had been training for six months to deliver was a bomb that unleashed the power of the atom. Whatever that meant.

"This thing is big, Eddie," Tibbets had said, his voice raspy. "What I've been told is that we're looking at a destructive force equal to..." He paused to painfully swallow. "Equal to 20,000 tons of TNT."

Houseman would never forget that moment, looking down at Tibbets flat on his back and hearing those words. How could tiny atoms make an explosion equal to 20,000 tons of TNT? And what did 20,000 tons of TNT even look like? Would it make a pile as big as a house? No, probably bigger, more like a small apartment building. Someday, when all this was over, he would thrill his wife, Marion, and son Charlie with the story.

"So, Eddie." Tibbets reached out a hot, clammy hand, smiling to hide the disappointment Houseman knew he was feeling. "It looks like you're the guy who's going to end the war. But no pressure, okay?"

"Gee, thanks, Colonel," Houseman replied with a grin. "That's just what I need!"

The dark hump of the crew lounge emerged from the darkness. It was an olive drab Quonset hut like all the others, but some effort had been expended to make it look a little more like home. Shrubbery and a bit of lawn had been planted, and a sign erected out front, announcing it as Tinian Tavern. When the beer wasn't flowing, it was where mission briefings were held. Two armed guards were on duty outside, standing motionless in the moonlight as Houseman mounted the steps.

The crews were already assembled inside. A murmur rose when Houseman entered and walked to the front.

"All right, listen up." It was Houseman's mission voice. Discipline taking over. "Colonel Tibbets went into the hospital earlier today. Don't ask me why because I can't tell you. But I'm told he's going to be okay, so there's no need to worry. I repeat: the colonel is going to be okay. In the meantime..."

He paused, looking around at the intense faces of the men.

"In the meantime, we're going ahead with the mission. There's supposed to be a break in the weather, and if we don't take advantage of it, we could lose a whole week. So we go tonight. That's the word. The Gimmick is being transferred to *Wicked Intent*."

The Gimmick. Houseman glanced at the weaponeer who had just been assigned to his crew, a cold-eyed commander in the U.S. Navy named Samuel Filson. They were the only two men in the room who knew the nature of the weapon. For the rest it was still a mystery, referred to as the Gadget or the Gimmick. But his own crew would know soon

enough. Houseman would fill them in on the way to Japan. He was looking forward to it. *Well, boys,* he would say, *it looks like we're splitting atoms today.* Then he would hit them with that bit about the 20,000 tons of TNT.

He winked at the crew members of the *Wicked Intent,* the guys he had been training with for six months, getting things to where they could drop a Gimmick on a dime. There was his copilot, John Morris, a killer at poker; navigator, "Billy" Boys, proud possessor of the foulest mouth in the Army Air Forces; tail gunner, "Pappy" de Gerald, sporting a cud of chewing tobacco in his cheek and spitting into a cup; flight engineer, "Hickey" Hicks; and bombardier, "Cy" O'Neill, who had dreamed up the clothes-snatching caper at the beach that had given them all such a good laugh.

"So that means it's us, guys," he said. "We'll be hauling this thing."

Houseman turned to the map pinned to the board behind him and got down to business. "All right. Primary target is Hiroshima. Secondary is Kokura. Third, Nagasaki.

"Weather ships." He turned to the crews of the three B-29s that would precede the strike team to radio back visibility conditions. "Take off at zero-one-thirty. Use the weather codes on the blue paper. No formation flying. Keep it spread out. You know the drill. Strike team. We go at zero-two-forty-five and proceed to Iwo. After rendezvous, it's compass heading 327 degrees, altitude 31,000 feet."

. . .

It took Major Houseman thirty minutes to get through the briefing, displaying the efficiency and focus that had made him the first choice to replace Tibbets in leading the historic mission. He ended with the synchronization of watches, then led the way to the mess hall for a breakfast he didn't want. He always felt queasy before missions, and this time was worse. He sat as far as he could from the smell of bacon and eggs as he spooned down a little oatmeal laced with brown sugar.

A hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see the flight surgeon.

"I hope you won't need these," the man said, handing Houseman a small pillbox. Inside it were ten cyanide capsules, one for each crew member in the event that the plane went down over Japan.

Houseman took the little packet of death and slipped it into his pocket. He figured the odds were in their favor, but he wasn't overly sanguine. In war, things went wrong. Throw a new weapon into the mix, a bomb never before used in combat, and the chance of a mishap became that much greater. Dummy gimmicks had already malfunctioned twice in practice drops off Tinian in the previous few days, one bomb tumbling unexploded into the sea and another detonating soon after leaving the plane. There was evidently some sort of fault in the proximity fuze.

Returning to his barracks tent, Houseman took a moment to say a prayer in private, asking God for steadiness and courage, for success in his mission, and for a speedy end to the war so that he could return home to New Jersey. He wanted to get to know Charlie, who was now nearly six. He also had a surprise for Marion, poker winnings totaling nearly two thousand dollars that would make a fat down payment on a house. But first he had to get through this mission.

When the time came, he pulled on his combat coveralls, collected his flight gear, and headed out to Tinian's North Field. The breeze in his face on the jeep ride felt good, taking the edge off the heat that the island had soaked up during the day. *Wicked Intent* was parked at the west end of Runway Able. He pulled to a stop under the scantily clad beauty painted on the nose, which would have been so much more lascivious if Billy Boys had his way. The crew lined up for a photograph, the prickly heat rash in Houseman's armpits now burning, for he was starting to sweat. A blinding flash exploded in the darkness.

"Okay, that's enough," said Houseman, annoyed. He groped his way up through the hatch and into his seat, a disk of light lingering on his retinas and overwhelming his vision.

Billy's voice behind him: "Goddamn it, I can't see a damn thing."

The stillness of the night was shattered by twelve 2,200-horsepower Wright Cyclone engines coughing to life, the three planes of the strike team. In addition to *Wicked Intent,* there was a B-29 that would drop instrument packages to measure the effects of the blast, and a second plane to film and take photos.

Wicked Intent led the way to the end of the runway and turned into the breeze. Houseman advanced the four engines to full power. The plane began lumbering down the crushed coral track, past the control tower, past the broken corpses and burned

skeletons of B-29s that had crashed at this same moment, on takeoff, and been dragged off to the side. Finally, with less than a hundred yards remaining, Houseman pulled back on the yoke and eased the behemoth bomber into the air.

. . .

Three hours into the mission. The sun was up, a glorious dawn at 8,000 feet, the clouds to the east turning from purple to red, then glowing orange, then full daylight. Major Houseman was starting to feel hungry. He took out one of the bologna sandwiches he had brought, along with a thermos of coffee, and tucked in as he gazed down at Iwo Jima below.

It took fifteen minutes to rendezvous with the two observation planes that would accompany them the rest of the way to Japan. Houseman then led the way onto compass heading 327 degrees—northwest—and began a slow climb. "We're going to pressurize now," he informed the crew, his throat mike conveying his voice through the plane's interphone system. This was the signal for Pappy to squeeze into the tail gunner's compartment, for once the plane was pressurized for high altitude the access door would be sealed. With *Wicked Intent* stripped of all its remote-controlled cannons to save weight, Pappy and his tail guns were its only defense.

Another two hours and Japan itself was in sight, Shikoku, one of the four main islands, emerging from the mist up ahead. Houseman recognized the distinctive arc of south-facing coastline that looked like a bite had been taken out of the island. The cloud cover could be a problem, nearly 50 percent. It would be difficult to deliver the bomb with any accuracy if similar conditions were awaiting them over the target.

His headphones crackled: "Okay, I'm arming it now." It was the weaponeer, the stranger sent out from Washington, Commander Samuel Filson, his voice taut as a wire. The arming procedure involved his entering the bomb bay to remove the green plugs from the bomb and replace them with red ones. This would in turn switch the lights on the monitoring equipment hooked up to the weapon from green to red, indicating that it was live and ready to go. From this point on, it would be up to the radar countermeasures officer, Clifford Slavin, who should be setting aside his comic book about now, to ensure

that enemy radar did not interfere with the signals emanating from the bomb, prematurely setting it off.

The first coded message from the weather planes was received: "Y-3, Q-5, B-4, D-7." Translation: cloud cover over primary target more than 50 percent.

That meant Hiroshima was out. Houseman felt his stomach tighten. The odds were turning against them.

A second message came in, this one from the weather plane over Kokura: "R-7, S-1, B-2, A-3." Translation: cloud cover over secondary target less than three-tenths.

A wave of relief. Kokura was a go. Houseman spoke into the interphone: "Okay, it's going to be—"

A jolt rocked the plane.

. . .

Houseman turned to look at his flight engineer, Ralph Hicks, seated behind him. Hickey's eyes were on the cylinder head temperature gauges, his finger tapping on the glass. Then he was hitting the fire extinguisher switch and pumping fuel out of the Number Two tank.

"We got a fire in Number Two," he said. "I think she swallowed a valve."

"Can we still make it?" It was Commander Filson, crouched over his row of red lights. He was plugged into the interphone and had heard the exchange.

Houseman didn't reply for a moment. He had experienced an engine fire before in a B-29, but never so deep in hostile airspace.

His hand went to his throat mike. "If we can get the fire out, yes. How's it looking, Hickey?"

Hickey flicked the engine fire extinguisher switch again. No good. The cylinder head temperature needle remained stuck at 350 degrees. That meant in all likelihood that the fire was burning inside the cowling, where the fire retardant couldn't reach.

"It's still burning," he said.

Houseman's grip on the yoke tightened, his mind racing. The engines of the recently developed B-29 were not only prone to burst into flames, their crankcases were fabricated

from a high-magnesium alloy to save weight—magnesium that, if it caught on fire, burned so hot that it could melt off the wing. And in the meantime it was producing a trail of black smoke that would be glaringly visible from the ground. The Japanese rarely attacked high-flying B-29s approaching singly or in small groups. They were too hard to bring down. But a B-29 trailing black smoke and clearly injured would be hard to resist. It was a target of opportunity, a real chance for a kill.

But they were so close. Less than thirty minutes and they would be over the target.

Houseman's eyes swept over the gauges. Airspeed barely holding at 189. Altitude: 28,000 feet and dropping. The *Intent*, running slower on three engines, was drifting lower, seeking denser air for support. To continue the mission would mean dropping the bomb from much lower than the 31,000 feet they had trained for. And they'd be too close when it detonated. They'd be knocked out of the sky.

He spoke to the crew: "That's it. It's an abort."

Filson reentered the bomb bay to replace the red plugs with the green, returning the weapon to safe mode. Back in the cockpit, Houseman was digging out a binder from beside his seat and flipping through to the page listing the codes for twenty-eight possible mission outcomes for transmission back to base. He ran his finger down the list to the one that he wanted, then spoke to his radio operator, Don Wood.

"Okay, Don. Send 25."

Number 25 meant *Returning with unit due to damage to aircraft.*

Houseman made the course correction, putting the bomber into a 180-degree turn. Down below, the dark green of Honshu, looking like crumpled tissue paper, began to rotate.

. . .

Wicked Intent came out of its turn, heading back south, altitude now holding steady at 25,000 feet. Number Two engine fuel tank was pumped dry and things were holding together. If the fire went out, they stood a chance of getting back to Iwo. If not, they were going down.

Major Houseman took out the pillbox he had been fingering in his vest pocket. He didn't want to hand out the capsules, but to do otherwise wouldn't be fair to the crew. They all knew how the Japanese treated downed airmen, going back to the Doolittle Raid and those eight guys who were starved and tortured and killed.

He leaned forward to the bombardier's seat and placed his hand on Cy's shoulder. "You might want to hang on to this," he said, holding out a capsule.

With *Wicked Intent* on autopilot, Houseman got up and began working his way through the plane, distributing a capsule to each man. He was on his way back to the cockpit when John Morris called from his copilot's seat, "We got company, chief!"

Houseman returned to his seat and snapped himself into his harness. "Okay, let's have it," he said.

"I count five fighters." It was Pappy on the interphone with his unimpeded view at the tail guns pointing back. "They look like Franks. Six o'clock. About six thousand feet down."

Houseman craned around, peering out his left side window, but couldn't see them.

There. He could see them now. They were definitely Nakajima Ki-84s. "Franks." They would be struggling on the edge of their maximum altitude. They wouldn't get much higher.

A series of blinks from the lead fighter. It was firing from too far out, a desperate move. No return fire from Pappy. He would be waiting until they were within a few hundred yards—if they made it that close.

Movement off to the left. Houseman raised his gaze to see a Tony, a Kawasaki Ki-61, no more than fifteen hundred feet out and just a few hundred feet down. It had broken away from the others for a separate approach.

"Nine o'clock low, Pappy!" he shouted. "He's coming right at us!"

The sound of Pappy's 50-cals. Houseman watched the first bursts of streaking bullets go wide.

The Tony kept coming, right into the face of Pappy's fire.

Half the distance gone now. Still no fire from the Tony. It just kept coming. Why wasn't he firing? Were his guns jammed?

A puff on the wing as the Tony was hit. Still no return fire.

Pappy must have got him!

The Tony wobbled but kept coming—so close now that Houseman could see the goggles, the oxygen mask, the tanned leather helmet of the Japanese pilot. That's when the realization hit him:

He's going to ram us.

The impact threw Houseman against the side of the cockpit, his head bouncing off the glass so hard that it left him momentarily stunned. As he regained his senses, he saw the horizon rising, up and up until the earth filled his field of vision. He stared, disoriented, as the mottled terrain began to rotate, wondering why the aircraft was pointing straight down.

A silvery mass entered his field of vision. It had a toppled-over "A" painted on it. It took a moment for him to process that it was the tail section. *Wicked Intent* had broken in two.

He fought with the controls, trying to level out using only the flaps. The mortally wounded aircraft slowly responded. The uncontrolled dive turned into a gentler downward spiral. But no amount of skill could arrest it.

In his final moments, with trees and rice fields coming at him, Houseman thought of Marion and Charlie and the house they were going to live in.

Then he saw a bright light.