

CHAPTER ONE

April 18, 1906
Wednesday, Early Morning

Pots and pans clattered onto the floor, waking Jackson Leong. He hugged his pillow and cursed the idiot in the kitchen who had disturbed his sweet dream. Then the bells of St. Mary's Church began clanging.

Wallpaper slid by.

Is this a dream? Can the wall be moving?

His bed creaked, scraping against the wall—then shot straight across the room.

“Yahhh!” Jack screamed and covered his eyes.

His older brother, Lincoln, bolted upright. “What’s going on?” he shouted.

The two boys hopped out of bed and dashed into Ma’s room. She was kneeling next to Anna and Constance, fumbling with

their socks and shoes in the dim light of a candle.

Is Ma crazy? Jack wondered. Taking them for a walk at this hour?

He flipped the wall switch several times, but there was no electricity.

“Get their coats and take them outside,” Ma said.

Jack barely heard her. Now, every church bell in town was ringing: bonging, pealing, tolling and dinging.

“Quick, outside!” Ma shouted. “Earthquake!”

Out front, the San Francisco sky was just brightening. Candles and lanterns bobbed over the street. On one side of the Leongs’ nickelodeon was the Tai Hing store and warehouse. Its workers stood on the road, gazing up at the building’s third floor. A mound of broken bricks now lay on the ground. Its front wall was completely demolished. The workers jabbered about their good luck, relieved that the fallen wall had not crushed them to death.

On the other side of the nickelodeon, the crew from the Wing Fung Garment Factory argued and cursed as they moved sewing machines onto the street. Ma did piecework for them.

“Stay away from the wall!” hollered Madame Fung, the boss lady. “The earth has not finished shaking yet. There may be aftershocks. And be careful with those machines. We shipped them all the way from New York!”

She wore a stiff blanket over her broad shoulders and red slippers on her feet. Next to her stood Yu-yi, one of her maids.

Her husband, Old Fung, went from worker to worker making sure no one was injured. Usually he wore fashionable

Western suits and leather shoes, but now his bare feet and baggy pyjamas made him look like a scarecrow.

Ma came running out. Her long skirt swirled behind her. “The roof may collapse!” she cried, blocking Lincoln’s way.

“I have to save the projector!” he yelled. “And the movies! We still owe money to the bank.”

Every two weeks, the Edison Company sent out new films while Lincoln forwarded the old ones to the next theatre on the circuit. *The Great Train Robbery*, *Life of an American Fireman* and *The Ex-Convict* were still inside the nickelodeon. Lincoln had bragged to Jack about his great plans for the business. He was sure that he could become a millionaire by showing movies in China.

Ma dragged Lincoln away from the building. He was sixteen, but she treated him like a five-year-old. He was big and tall and had quickly learned everything the family needed to know about their new hometown. But that didn’t matter. Ma had the final say on everything.

Jack crept to the window and looked inside. Miraculously the projector, the piano and the chairs and benches were undamaged. Nothing had fallen over.

“Get away from the building!” Ma called out. “Go take care of your sisters.”

“Bring the crates into the middle of the road,” Madame Fung ordered Yu-yi.

“Let me help you,” Lincoln said.

He’s soft on Yu-yi, Jack thought.

“Sit!” Madame Fung said with a nervous laugh, turning to Ma. “When the Earth Dragon moves again, it’s better to feel the tremors on our cushy bums.”

“If only Ba hadn’t died,” Ma said, “then we’d be safe in Marysville on the farm. And if Gee Uncle hadn’t gone to China, then he’d be here to take care of us.”

“The telephone exchange is down,” Old Fung blurted. “There’s no water. The gas lines are leaking. Don’t light matches. Don’t smoke. The whole city might explode.”

Jack’s cousin Kern ran up, breathless. He was Lincoln’s age, and bigger and taller than Jack. “The city is in ruins!” he shouted. “This is the biggest disaster ever!”

The two boys darted up California Street. A crowd of dazed-looking people stared down the slope toward the harbour at the dark black smoke rising from raging fires. Usually at this time of the day, San Francisco’s thick fog shrouded the downtown core, hiding everything except the upper windows of the tallest towers.

Buildings and walls had collapsed along the steep hillside near the boys. Homes were slashed open like dollhouses, exposing fireplaces, chairs and paintings. People dragged furniture onto the sidewalk.

Suddenly the cobblestones under the boys’ feet shuddered.

“Earthquake!” Kern shouted, grabbing Jack.

“Let go!”

A fire wagon clattered past with horses galloping at full speed.

A man rushed through the crowd, pulling a baby carriage that clinked and clanked with the brittle sound of chinaware. A cage holding a squawking blue-green parakeet rested on top. It sounded like a frightened child.

People are crazy, Jack thought. They’re saving dishes?

Two men carried a woman out of a nearby house. Her long nightdress was soaked in blood. They laid her on the sidewalk, covered her with heavy blankets and bent over her. One man pulled her hand to his lips.

Jack saw the woman’s ghost rise up through the blankets and float over the houses. It drifted away without looking back. Both of the men howled in grief when they realized the woman had died.

Today is going to be bad, very bad. Ghosts will be everywhere! I wish I didn’t have yin-yang eyes. Jack turned away, feeling sick. He had never let anyone, not even Lincoln, find out about his ability to see ghosts, because he knew people would avoid him like a bad disease.

Gusts of acrid smoke suddenly engulfed them.

“We’d better run!” Kern said, coughing like a sick man. “The fires are coming this way!”

The boys hurried back to the nickelodeon.

Ma was still chatting with Madame Fung. “Do you think it’s safe to go to the temple?” Ma asked, holding Constance on her lap while Anna clung to her skirt.

“I hope so. We need to pray. Offerings at the temple go straight to the gods.”

Yung Uncle ran up, all out of breath. He was still neatly dressed in a cook’s uniform for his job at a fancy downtown hotel.

“What are you waiting for?” he shouted to everyone, jumping onto a crate. “Run! Hoodlums are looting downtown

shops. Entire streets are burning. The army is there! The fire is spreading! Get out of Chinatown; otherwise you'll burn to death!"

Ma began to weep, which started the girls whimpering.

"I'd better find the old ones," Kern said, rushing off down the street.

Lincoln gestured to Jack. "This way—hurry!"

The boys ran behind the nickelodeon. Lincoln grabbed an old wheelbarrow that had lain upside down ever since the family had moved in. Its rusty wheels squealed, refusing to turn. The brothers pushed and heaved it up the back stairway. Finally, it slid over the threshold.

"Help me get the projector," Lincoln said, heading into the nickelodeon.

They lifted the projector onto the wheelbarrow and cushioned it with blankets.

"What about the piano?" Jack asked.

"Don't be silly, you idiot. It's too big."

Outside, Kern's parents, Cat Uncle and Cat Aunty, had arrived. Although Cat Aunty and Ma were sisters, they looked very different. Ma's face was brown and weathered, and her body was sturdy from years of doing farm work, while her sister was a city lady, pale and delicate. Ma always wore Western-style skirts and boots, while Cat Aunty shimmered in embroidered silks. But today Cat Aunty wore a long coat and hat instead of Chinese clothes.

"I told you not to go inside!" Ma scolded the boys. "You could have been hurt!"

"We're fine," Lincoln insisted. "Stop worrying!"

"Can I help you with that wheelbarrow?" Cat Uncle asked.

"I could push this thing all the way to New York with one hand!"

"Don't worry. Everything will turn out all right," Cat Uncle said to Ma.

She didn't answer. Ma kept her distance from Cat Uncle because he ran an opium shop. Even so, Cat Aunty was close to Ma and often babysat her nieces.

"You should have gone to China with Gee Uncle," Cat Aunty said.

Gee Uncle was Ba's brother, the other side of the family.

"You know we couldn't. He insisted that Lincoln run the nickelodeon," Ma said, wiping her eyes.

"The fire is coming closer and burning everything in its path!" Old Fung yelled. "Get out of Chinatown now!"

Lincoln tied Constance onto Jack's back, and she held tightly onto a fistful of his hair. Jack took Anna's hand and they set off behind Lincoln, who was pushing the wheelbarrow.

"Did you bring anything to eat?" Anna asked.

Jack shook his head.

They hurried up California Street. A warm gritty wind blew up from the bay. The street swarmed with people fleeing the flames. Everybody shouted advice. Strangers helped one another. Nob Hill was steep, and there was rubble from fallen buildings everywhere. Deep potholes cratered the ground. The cable car rail that ran straight up and down the hill was now bent and crooked.

Jack had never seen such a massive crowd. People were weighed down by bulging carpet bags. They dragged children clutching precious toys. Men and boys pushed wagons filled with furniture.

When a carriage pulled by, some people called out asking for a ride. Cat Uncle's family pressed ahead, leaving Ma and the children behind.

Shouldn't we all stay together? Jack thought. *If Ma were nicer to Cat Uncle, he would wait for us to catch up.*

"Watch the girls closely!" Ma yelled as she was swept away by a surge of the crowd.

"Hold on tight, Connie," Jack said. She grabbed his shirt collar, and he squeezed Anna's sticky hand.

"What happened there?" Anna asked, pointing to a brass bed dangling out of a second-floor window, its bedsheet flapping in the wind. "And there!" A bedroom mirror taller than Lincoln was snagged in the high branches of a tree.

Anna looked intently at everything. Every stained-glass window, gold-painted sign and black iron railing caught her eye.

"Who did that?" she asked, pointing at a gleaming white bathtub, lying on its side.

How can I explain this to her? Jack thought.

Dogs were running wild, barking at everyone. Their owners had probably left them behind.

"Where are we going?" Anna asked.

Jack wanted to shrug, but he caught himself and comforted her by saying, "We're going back to our old farm in Marysville."

A second later, she repeated her question.

"Why don't you ever believe what I tell you?" Jack said, annoyed. "You always believe whatever Lincoln says."

Jack hated San Francisco. It rained too much. His one set of clothes stayed damp for days. Kern was his only real friend. School was painful. After classes he went home right away

because Ma worried that he might get beaten or stabbed or tossed into the bay by white hooligans. She wouldn't let Anna go out to play in the streets by herself, because Ma was afraid she'd be kidnapped. Jack wanted to go back to the farm.

Now we have a perfect excuse to leave the city for good.

"I want Mama!" Anna whined.

Jack looked around but couldn't see Ma or Lincoln anywhere. He dragged Anna up the stairs of a nearby house to get a better view. A river of frightened people streamed toward them: white and black and brown faces, young and old, some well-dressed and others not. But there was no one he knew.

They must be ahead of us.

Jack yanked Anna down to the street and told her to walk faster. She whimpered and threatened to throw a tantrum.

Doesn't she know we're in the middle of an earthquake, and the city is breaking apart!

"Jackson! Jackson!" Lincoln shouted.

Jack stood on his tiptoes and saw his brother waving in the midst of the crowd, but a mob of panicky, shouting people suddenly blocked them.

"Elder Brother is coming!" Jack told Anna. "He'll carry you so you don't have to walk."

Jack struggled through the wall of people toward Lincoln, but his brother had disappeared from sight.

When he finally got closer, he saw a wagon overturned on the road. Heavy furniture was scattered everywhere. A hand and shirt sleeve poked out from under the overturned wagon.

"No," he gasped. *It's Lincoln!*

Madame Fung's maid, Yu-yi, stood next to the overturned wagon. She was weeping.

“A runaway wagon rolled down the hill and hit him,” Old Fung said, patting Jack’s shoulder. “It looks bad.”

Madame Fung sat in her buggy holding her head in her hands.

“Get out of the way!” someone shouted at Old Fung.

Old Fung quickly lifted Yu-yi onto the buggy next to the sewing machines and bundles of cloth. Then he clucked at his horse and urged it forward.

At that moment Lincoln’s ghost rose up from the overturned wagon and floated away, his head tilted toward the sky.

Farewell, Elder Brother. Take care of yourself.

“Jack, Anna!”

He looked around. Ma was pushing the wheelbarrow through the onlookers. When she saw Jack’s stricken face and the shirt sleeve under the wagon, she screamed and fell forward. Weeping and moaning, she crawled to Lincoln. Jack knelt and pulled the girls close so they wouldn’t see Ma. Anna and Constance were crying, and Jack couldn’t see for the tears in his eyes. He murmured his brother’s name. He felt people walk by, heard them murmur and mutter, and smelled the pungent horse dung on the road.

What would they do now?

He stood up. Ma’s face was tear-stained, her eyes swollen and red.

“What do we do?” Jack asked. “We can’t leave him lying there. We’ll have to push him all the way across town!”

“That’s right.” Ma snapped. “Lift him into the wheelbarrow. We can’t stay here.”

“What about the projector?”

Just then, uniformed soldiers came by with a wagon piled high with bodies, some wrapped in blankets.

“Stand aside,” a soldier said. “We’ll take care of him.”

Two of them pulled Lincoln out from under the overturned wagon and swung his body on top of the others.

“Wait!” Ma shouted at the soldiers. Then she stepped up to the wagon and tapped Lincoln’s shoulder.

“To send him on his way,” she said, looking at Jack. “Let’s go, now. We have to keep moving.”

She tied a cord around Anna’s wrist and fastened it to her belt. “Lift Constance onto my back.”

Jack wanted to ask about burying Lincoln and about what rituals to perform. Instead he kept silent, focusing on pushing the wheelbarrow to the top of Nob Hill. At the top loomed the castle-like Fairmont Hotel, so new that it wasn’t even open yet. Somehow it had withstood the earthquake with little damage.

The family flowed with the crowd, trudging across the city, past streets and houses they had never seen before. From time to time, Jack looked behind him. Huge dark clouds boiled in the sky.

It’s the end of the world. I wonder how many people died today.

Later that afternoon the family reached Golden Gate Park. Soldiers were busy putting up canvas tents for the thousands of refugees. Horses and wagons clattered by.

Ma sank down on the grass, and Jack untied Constance.

“Go walk around,” Ma said, “and look for Chinese people.”

Jack's feet ached, yet off he went. Every few steps he glanced back. It wasn't long before trees and people swallowed up Ma, the wheelbarrow and his sisters.

"Make way! Make way!" Soldiers rushed by with a body on a stretcher. Other uniformed men drove metal spikes into the ground to erect tents. Babies wailed. Teams of horses trotted by. People carried pails of precious water. Old people sat on the grass, dazed, staring at the ground. Children chased each other, playing games and laughing as if they were on a picnic.

Jack didn't see any Chinese people, but he kept on walking. Near some trees, a man embraced a sobbing woman. Someone opened an umbrella and held it over them.

Jack gave up, turned around and tried to find his way back. But he had no idea which direction to take. Every tent looked the same.

Just then he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Kern and Cat Uncle.

"Where's your mother?" Cat Uncle asked. "We've been looking for you everywhere."

"At the entrance to the park, but I don't know the way back."

"Hey, what's wrong with your face?" Kern asked. "Have you been crying?"

"Lincoln was killed."

Silently, Cat Uncle shook his head and put his arm around Jack.

After a while Jack asked, "What rituals should we do for Lincoln? At Ba's funeral, we had black arm bands for everyone, plenty of incense, offerings of ghost money and bowing to his portrait."

"We do not do anything for Lincoln," Cat Uncle said softly.

"Because of the earthquake?"

"Because your mother is still alive. A child should not die before his parents. It is not the way of the universe. Therefore, when such a terrible thing happens, we ignore it."

"Then we'll forget all about Lincoln!" Jack exclaimed. "That's not right."