

Chapter 1



MORNING OF THE EARTH DRAGON

At first, Lily Chen thought it was another nightmare. The roaring sea. The slamming waves. So often, her dreams took her back to the crowded, lurching ship that had brought her across the ocean to San Francisco five years ago.

But this nightmare didn't end when Lily opened her eyes.

An angry roar shook the mission home where she lived with fifty other girls and women. Lily sat up in bed as the mirror over the dresser crashed to the floor. It smashed

into shining pieces that danced and skidded over the wood. The whole house rocked as if an angry giant shook it in his palm. The window rattled itself free and crashed to the street below.

Lily's bed jumped up and down and sideways until she was thrown to the floor. She crawled to the open window and pulled herself up to look outside. The street was a rolling wave of cobblestones.

People stood in their nightshirts, looking up to the sky. An old man raced into the street in his bare feet, shouting, "Aiyaaa, dei lung zan! Aiyaaa, dei lung zan!" which means "The earth dragon is wiggling!"

Lily understood this was one of California's earthquakes. Usually, they were trembles that shook pictures from the walls. But today, Lily felt like one of the rats that the neighborhood dogs liked to catch and thrash about. She

staggered back to her bed and clung to the headboard.

The house swayed like a ferryboat in a storm. Ceiling timbers groaned. Chimney bricks crashed onto the roof. Lily's room filled with dust as the plaster walls cracked and crumbled.

It felt as if the shaking might never end, but finally the house settled. Lily picked her way through the broken mirror pieces to the door.

It was jammed shut, stuck in the twisted door frame. But Lily was big for her age, and strong. As a servant in Chinatown, she'd lugged around pails of stew and baskets of vegetables every day. She yanked until the frame let go and sent her flying backward across the glass-strewn floor.

"Are you all right?" a voice called from the hallway. It was Donaldina Cameron, the woman who ran the mission house. The girls

called her Lo Mo, or “old mother,” but she was nothing like the mother Lily remembered from home. Lily’s real mother smelled of earth from working the farm. Her real mother was far away over the ocean, in China’s Guangdong province.

Lo Mo’s mission house was better than being beaten as a servant, but it was a long way from home.

“We’ve been shaken, but this good house is still standing,” Lo Mo told the girls. “Come downstairs, and we’ll see about breakfast.”

Lily and the other girls climbed over fallen bookshelves and got themselves dressed. The quake had rattled pictures from the walls and toppled dressers, but somehow the fishbowl on the little hallway table had survived.

“Gum Gum!” Lily rushed over, knelt down, and smiled at the little fish. Some of his water had sloshed out onto the table, but he was all



right. “Your golden color certainly brought you good fortune this morning,” she said.

When Lily went downstairs, her heart sank. The girls had cleaned the house spotless that week. They’d swept and dusted and draped a beautiful fishnet in the chapel room to get ready for the annual meeting of the people who ran the home. Now all the dishes had been tossed about and broken. The chimney had collapsed. How would they even cook?

Lo Mo settled everyone down, and soon there was breakfast. Someone brought baskets of bread from a bakery nearby. Another neighbor appeared with apples and a kettle of tea. Lily sat with the others at the little white tables and recited a Psalm from the Bible.

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want . . .”

Lily’s mind wandered. Even as the girls ate, there was talk of packing and going to the

Presbyterian church on Van Ness Avenue until it was certain the home would be safe.

Lo Mo told them to gather just a few things. They finished eating and set to packing up bundles of bedding, clothes, and a little food.

Outside, Chinatown buzzed with noise. Doors slammed. Voices filled with worry, and fear drifted through the broken windows. When Lily returned to the kitchen and looked out the door, she understood why.

The sky was full of dust clouds where buildings had collapsed. In the distance, half a dozen dark plumes of smoke rose into the quiet sky.

The earthquake was only the beginning.