

WRITTEN BY GAIL LANGER KARWOSKI ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT PAPP

QUAKE!

DISASTER IN SAN FRANCISCO, 1906



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*For my daughter Leslie,
who turned nine in San Francisco
and loves the city's spirit as much as I do.*

—GLK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Chapter 1—APRIL 17, 1906</i>	1
<i>Chapter 2—A HOUSE BUT NOT A HOME</i>	9
<i>Chapter 3—DISASTER BEFORE DAWN</i>	20
<i>Chapter 4—AFTERSHOCK</i>	27
<i>Chapter 5—SOUTH OF MARKET</i>	34
<i>Chapter 6—RESCUE</i>	45
<i>Chapter 7—UNION SQUARE</i>	53
<i>Chapter 8—SWEET AND SOUR</i>	67
<i>Chapter 9—SAN FRANCISCO IN RUINS</i>	77
<i>Chapter 10—GOLDEN GATE PARK</i>	86
<i>Chapter 11—CAMP FLANAGAN</i>	95
<i>Chapter 12—RATS AND GHOSTS</i>	108
<i>Chapter 13—A SHIRT STORY</i>	117
<i>Chapter 14—KEEPIN’ SPIRITS BRIGHT</i>	120
<i>Chapter 15—WAVES OF DOUBT</i>	130
<i>Chapter 16—THE WARM, SOFT LIGHT OF THE CAMPFIRE</i>	136
<i>AUTHOR’S NOTE</i>	145

CHAPTER 1

APRIL 17, 1906

At first he didn't notice the dog. Late afternoon sun bathed the cobblestones as Jacob Kaufman trudged up Washington Street to finish the deliveries from his father's meat stand. On such an unusually warm April day, the bustling streets of downtown San Francisco should have been a delight for a boy of thirteen. But since his mother's death, Jacob hardly noticed his surroundings. His mind was blanketed by troubling thoughts, like the fog that sometimes blew in from the bay and blocked out the sky.

Something bumped against Jacob's leg, and he stopped and looked down. It was a young dog with a springy step and golden brown fur. Jacob had never seen a dog carry its tail like this one, curled into a perfect letter C over its rump.

Jacob watched the dog nose a grape that had fallen on the ground. The animal licked the little fruit, then tried to pick it up with its teeth, but the grape rolled into the dirt between the cobblestones. Eyes alert and muscles tense, the dog pounced. When the grape wedged in a hole, the dog began to paw at it, but the lumpy stones stuck up too far. Frustrated, the dog made a sound that was part whine, part howl.

Jacob picked up the sticky, grit-covered grape and held it out on his palm. The dog opened its mouth in what looked like a grin and wagged its tail. Taking a cautious step toward Jacob, it

QUAKE

nuzzled the boy's palm, then enclosed the grape in its sparkling white teeth. Instead of biting down, the dog rolled the rubbery grape around in its mouth, tilting its head from side to side. Finally the puzzled dog spit the unbroken grape onto the street and sniffed it curiously.

Laughing out loud, Jacob petted the animal's soft head. The dog twisted its mouth into that odd little grin again.

"Tell you what, fella," Jacob said. "You probably wouldn't like that grape even if you could figure out how to eat it. Try this instead." He reached into his sack and tore a greasy chunk of fat off the meat inside. The dog gulped down the fat, then licked Jacob's fingers until every trace of grease was gone.

"What's going on here?" boomed Uncle Avram. "I ask my brother the butcher to send me some meat for supper, and here my nephew is giving it away to a stray dog?"

Jacob looked up. Avram Kaufman's big hands were planted on his narrow hips and the muscles in his arms bulged beneath his rolled-up sleeves. Although he spoke in a loud, stern voice, his dark eyes sparkled with laughter.

Jacob grinned at his uncle as he stood up and handed over the sack.

Avram was the younger of the two Kaufman brothers. Short and slim, he had dark, curly hair and a good-natured if homely face—unruly eyebrows, thick nose, and fleshy lips. Jacob called him Uncle Avi, and his uncle's deep, hearty laugh was what he always associated with the man.

Avi tousled Jacob's hair and asked, "How goes it at my brother's home, nephew?"

Suddenly the fog seemed to wrap around Jacob's mind again. *Home*. Jacob pictured the dark boardinghouse south of Mission Street where he and his father and sister lived. He could practically smell the familiar odors—cabbage boiling on the stove,



“What’s going on here?” boomed Uncle Avram.

QUAKE

latkes sizzling in the pan. With the memory, Jacob felt an ache deep inside, an indescribable longing and emptiness. *Oh, Uncle Avi*, Jacob wanted to say, *there's no such thing as a home without a mother!*

“All right, I guess,” Jacob mumbled, avoiding his uncle’s eyes. He knew that if he tried to describe his feelings, his uncle would stare at him with eyes full of pity. Then Jacob’s voice would crack, and he was afraid he’d start crying like a baby. He would not let himself cry. Not in front of his uncle—and certainly not in front of strangers on a public street. On Jacob’s last birthday he had celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. So in the eyes of his Jewish forefathers, wasn’t he already a man?

Avi shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I see you’ve made friends with this little dog,” he said. “He’s a foolish animal, don’t you think? A dog that comes begging on the street of the fruit and vegetable peddlers. Wouldn’t you think his nose would lead him to the street of the butchers? Or to the wharves, where fishermen bring in their catch?”

“Maybe he belongs to one of the peddlers?”

Uncle Avi shook his head. “He belongs to nobody, Jacob. And how do I know this? Because for three days and three nights, this foolish animal follows me around like he’s my shadow. I ignore him, but he follows me anyway. So last night I take pity on him and bring out a little bowl of scraps for him to eat. And what do you think he does? He gobbles them up so fast that I’m afraid he’s going to choke, like he hasn’t eaten in a month!”

Jacob smiled and leaned over to stroke the dog’s velvety ears. “So this dog does belong to somebody, Uncle Avi. He belongs to you.”

“Nah!” Avi exclaimed, waving his hand through the air. “What am I going to do with a dog? What am I going to feed

APRIL 17, 1906

him? Apple peels? And your Aunt Rose—don't even ask! She let me have it! When I came back in the house, Rose grabbed the empty bowl and started hollering. 'What do you think you're doing, Avram Kaufman? We have three babies to feed, and all of a sudden you decide to bring home stray dogs—Noo! Is this what I need?' She yelled so loud I thought my ears would burst!"

Jacob grinned. Most of the Jews who had moved from Poland to San Francisco—like his father and uncle—knew one another. Among them, Rose Kaufman had a reputation. Everybody said her tongue was sharper than a butcher's knife. Over the years, Jacob had often heard his parents discussing Aunt Rose. Mamma used to defend her sister-in-law by saying that Rose "means well." But Papa always replied, "Rose has a mouth as big as a whale, and who worries about what a whale means as it swallows you?"

"Rose says she has enough to do, with an infant to nurse and twins still in diapers," Avi continued. "She told me if I wanted to share my home with a stray dog, I could take my blanket out to the street and use my cart for my bed and a bunch of bananas as my pillow!"

"So what will you do with the dog?" Jacob asked.

Avi rubbed his chin. "I don't know," he said. "I thought maybe I would ask your father if he wants a dog...for his children to play with. Maybe a dog would take their minds off their sorrow."

Jacob's dark eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

Avi nodded.

Jacob knelt and scratched the white fur on the dog's chin and chest. The dog made that odd little grinning face and wiggled its whole body. Then it licked Jacob's eyelids. Jacob rolled the dog onto its back and scratched its dirty belly until the animal wriggled with pleasure.

QUAKE

As he played with the dog, Jacob glanced at his uncle. A smile lit up Avi's face, and Jacob guessed what his uncle was thinking. "You look just like I remember your father looked when he was a boy," Avi always said. "The same black, curly hair. The same skinny arms and long fingers, even the same laugh." Whenever they sat around the table at family gatherings, Avi told stories about the Kaufman brothers' childhood, about all the times they got into mischief playing on the muddy paths of their village in Poland.

Avi put his hand on his nephew's head. "Now remember, I haven't spoken to your father yet," he said. "So don't get attached to this dog. Itzak may not like the idea. He may think a dog would only be more trouble. After all, your sister Sophie is too little to take care of a pet. And you're busy delivering meat as soon as you come home from school."

"But the dog could stay in the house with Sophie. Then she wouldn't be so frightened of staying by herself."

Avi winced and chewed his lip. "A five-year-old is too young to stay home by herself, even with a dog. I told your father that my Rose will watch over Sophie. As soon as the baby starts sleeping a little better, Rose promised me that she'll watch over your sister while Itzak is at work."

"Well, then the dog could stay at Papa's meat stand until I get home from school. In the afternoon, I can take him with me while I do the deliveries," Jacob said. He was getting more excited as he talked. "Look! He's not such a big dog—he won't eat so much. Besides, Papa is a butcher—he has plenty of scraps, fat and bones. He gives them away to poor families whenever they ask, and still he has more that he throws away."

"Jacob, Jacob, you're always full of answers!" Avi laughed. "But it's for Itzak to decide, so don't get your heart set."

Jacob's smile faded. He stood and brushed off his pants.

APRIL 17, 1906

“You’re right, Uncle Avi. I know what my father will say. ‘No.’ That’s what he says about everything. He’ll say that he’s got enough trouble, with a son who does nothing but daydream. And a five-year-old daughter who has no mother to watch over her. He’ll say he doesn’t need another headache, like a dog.”

Avi put his hand on Jacob’s shoulder. “Itzak loved your mother very much, you know. It’s not easy for him.”

Jacob pulled away. “I have to go, Uncle Avi,” he said. “Sophie is all by herself, and you know how scared she is of staying alone when it gets dark. It’ll take me at least a half hour to get home, even if I run most of the way.”

“Wait a minute, nephew!” Avi said. “I want you to tell my brother something...” He paused, thinking, then spoke rapidly. “Tell Itzak that he should bring Sophie to my house tomorrow morning. So Rose can watch over her.”

“But Uncle Avi,” Jacob objected, “you just told me that Aunt Rose can’t take care of Sophie until the new baby—”

“Why are you telling me what Rose can or cannot do?” Avi scolded. “Who is married to your Aunt Rose—you or me? I say that Rose is ready to watch Sophie! Isn’t Sophie the only daughter of my only brother? Of course the aunt should watch the niece!” Avi slapped his hands up and down as though he had just unloaded a dusty carton and he was brushing off his palms.

“In return,” Avi added, “my brother should take this dog off my hands. Tell Itzak that if he doesn’t, he will be forcing his younger brother to sleep outside. With a bunch of bananas for a pillow.”

Jacob grinned. “Are you sure, Uncle Avi?”

“Of course I’m sure.” He took Jacob by the shoulders. “Now you go home. You shouldn’t leave Sophie all alone when it’s about to get dark. Take this dog with you. You tell my brother that a dog should not have to eat apple peels for the rest of its

QUAKE

life. And here in America, children should not have to eat misery for the rest of their lives.”

As Jacob turned to go, Avi grabbed the boy’s head and hugged it to his chest. “I would come to tell my brother these things myself, but I have something else to do this evening. I have to go to the flower peddler and see if he has any roses to sell.”

Avi winked at his nephew. “You know, Jacob, when I bring roses to my wife, I always remove the thorns and throw them away. I do this so my children will not get scratched.” Avi nodded as he continued. “Tonight I will explain to your Aunt Rose that I do this because I am the father, and I want the children to be safe. I am also the uncle to you and Sophie. It is my duty to make sure all the children in the family are safe.”

Jacob laughed. Then he slapped his thigh, and the dog bounded to his side. He backed away, watching the dog follow with that odd little grin on its whiskered face. Waving good-bye to his uncle, he turned to go. As he ran down the hill the dog ran beside him, pink tongue hanging out of one side of its mouth.