Chapter I

We Never Look Like Us

Minnow, 14

March 1942

It's been over three months since the attack on Pearl Harbor, and my oldest brother, Mas, has told me to come straight home from school each day. *Take the bus,* he says. *No loitering around,* he says. *I mean it, Minnow.*

I used to love walking back to the apartment in the afternoons, seeing all the interesting things going on in the city: bodies being excavated at Calvary Cemetery, buildings going up in empty lots, chattering kids coming out of Kinmon Gakuen, the old Japanese language school.

But that's been closed since last December, when it became the Civil Control Station, because Pearl Harbor changed everything for us. We have a new eight-p.m. curfew. People are starting to talk about involuntary evacuation. And Mas has warned me not to get caught out alone. *Don't do anything that'll make them come down on you,* he says. *Don't give them any excuse.*

And I haven't.

Until today.

I don't know what happened. I was walking out of George Washington High School, headed for the bus stop like always, when I saw the football team practicing on the field, racing back and forth across the grass with the red towers of the Golden Gate Bridge rising beyond the school building like a promise, and before I knew it, I was sitting in the

bleachers with my sketchbook in my hands and my butt going numb on the concrete.

Oops.

I'm so panicked, I gather up my sketchpad and bolt right past the bus stop, hoping to make it home before Mas gets back from work.

No matter how many times I try to explain it, he never understands. Sometimes I get so wrapped up in a drawing that I get transported onto the paper, and the charcoal suspension cables and pencil players become more real to me than the bleachers or the grass or the school, and when I come back to my body, it's hours later, everyone's gone, and I'm walking home alone as fog cascades into the bay.

I know it'd be faster if I waited for a bus, but I'm afraid if I hang around at one of the stops, someone will chase me off, or call me "Jap!" or worse. So I keep walking, and buses keep passing me while I'm between stops, and I keep thinking I should just wait at the next one, but . . .

Mas says that's my problem—there's always something going on inside my head, but I never *think*.

My middle brother, Shig, likes to tell him it's because my head's up in the clouds, where it doesn't do me any good.

I'm still walking, trying to decide if I should keep going or try waiting, when I catch sight of a flyer for Sutro Baths in a drugstore window, and I stop cold. For a second, all I can think is, *Mas was right. I* don't *think.*

I should've gone straight home. I should've waited for a bus. I shouldn't be out like this. Because it's dangerous to be hanging around with a face like mine, three months into the war.

It was a Sunday in December, and we were getting ready for lunch when Mas asked Shig to turn on the radio and we all heard the news that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor.

Mom's face went taut and white as a sheet. If I was going to draw her the way she looked then, I'd draw her with thin lips and frightened eyes, pinned to a clothesline, her

body flapping in the wind of a passing Nakajima B5N bomber.

We've never been allowed inside Sutro Baths, but I used to draw it from the park at Lands End (the glass ceilings, the rough water, the tide-eaten cliffs), imagining what it was like inside those glinting cupolas: the smell of salt water and wet concrete, every sound in that echoing space a slap.

Now I kind of wish the whole thing would slide into the Pacific.

The ad says Get in trim for fighting him! and in the center there's a drawing of a Japanese soldier with diagonal slits for eyes, nostrils like watermelon seeds, and two big square teeth jutting out over his lower lip.

I'm not a great artist or anything, but I'm a better artist than *that.* When I draw the people in my neighborhood, I draw them with eyes like crescent moons and kindness and red bean cakes split down the center. I draw them with real noses and regular-size teeth. If someone is out looking for a Japanese spy and they think a Japanese spy looks like the guy from the Sutro's ad, they'll never find him.

After the attack, the chimneys in Japantown bloomed with smoke. In the living room, Mom dug into her trunks and began feeding heirlooms into the fireplace, starting with the Japanese flag. I remember her kneeling by the hearth, plump hands folded in her lap, watching the flames obliterate the white sky, the red sun. Next, she burned letters from relatives I'd never met, Jii-chan's Imperial Army uniform, smelling of mothballs, and a woodblock print of ancestral warriors I used to study for hours (the armor, the ferocious eyes, the wild, battle-blown hair). They looked nothing like me, in my denim and button-downs.

Mas tried to stop her (some of the things she was burning belonged to Dad), but she didn't stop.

"I'm not a citizen," she told him. "If they think I'm disloyal, they'll take me away like Oishi-san."

Mr. Oishi, Shig's girl Yum-yum's dad, is a businessman with contacts in Japan. The FBI whisked him away the night of the bombing like a piece of litter.

He and Mom are what the government calls "enemy aliens."

We call them Issei. They're the first generation of Japanese immigrants to come to the United States, but they've never been allowed to become naturalized citizens.

That night, I sat on our stoop and drew the Japantown skyline with storm-colored flowers rising from the rooftops, dispersing ash like seeds on the wind.

Studying my reflection in the drugstore window, I put my fingers to the corners of my eyes, pulling upward to see if I can make myself look like the guy from the flyer. (I can't.) Behind me, there's the sound of heels clicking on the sidewalk, and two white women in polo coats, hats, and little suede gloves pass, staring with round blue eyes like binocular lenses, and I remember to keep walking.

As I pass beneath the Spanish tile roofs and honeycomb windows of the Jewish Community Center, I almost kick myself for forgetting again. I should've waited at the bus stop. In my head, I hear Mas's voice again—*Think, Minnow*—deep and gruff like if he was forced to say a kind word, he'd choke on it.

Mas—that's short for Masaru—is big and handsome and a lot more serious than he should be at twenty years old. If I was going to draw him, I'd draw him as a rectangle of granite with a chisel-cut mouth and stony black eyes. Sometimes I think Mas looks at me with those eyes and sees nothing but the A's I could be getting on my report card if only I "applied myself." He doesn't see *me* (Minoru Ito, solid B student), doesn't see that I'd rather be filling my sketchpad with stick figures than throwing touchdowns or doing geometry proofs.

If he finds out I didn't take the bus directly after school, he'll yell at me for sure.

I'm on the outskirts of Japantown when I pass a store I know almost as well as any

place in the neighborhood, a grocery owned by Stan Katsumoto's family. They get fruits and vegetables from their cousins in Sacramento, and if we aren't forced to evacuate, in a couple of months they'll have the best peaches in the city: soft, sweet as candy, with juices that run down your chin. Once, when we were younger, all of us stuffed ourselves on the bruised fruit Mr. Katsumoto couldn't sell. Shig ate so much, he threw it all up again and smiled the whole time, saying it tasted as good coming up as it did going down.

Looking at it now, I kind of feel sick. In addition to the words GROCERY and FRUITS & VEGETABLES, there's a new sign. Over the door on a big white board are the words I AM AN AMERICAN. One of the windows is busted and covered up with plywood.

After Pearl Harbor, it seemed like ketos white people—were jumping everyone with black hair and brown eyes. It got so out of hand that Chinese guys started pinning badges to their lapels declaring I am Chinese, just so the ketos would leave them alone.

Before Christmas, *Life* magazine published an article called, "How to Tell Japs from the Chinese." I guess it was supposed to tell ketos which of us to attack, but if you ask me, it wasn't very helpful, because American citizens are still getting jumped all the time, like when the ketos cornered Tommy Harano behind the YMCA. They shoved him around and called him dirty words like "Jap" and "Nip." They said the only good Jap was a dead Jap. They said they were going to do their country a favor and get rid of him right then.

It was lucky Mr. Tanaka, who works at the YMCA, came out for a smoke, because he chased off the ketos and sat with Tommy until he stopped shaking.

That's why Mas doesn't want me or Shig to act out at all. We can't call attention to ourselves in any way.

Except some of the guys, like Shig's best buddy, Twitchy Hashimoto, you can't help but pay attention to. Twitchy's the best-looking guy in our group, the kind of handsome that makes everybody, even ketos, stop and stare. He's tall and slim, with straight white teeth that belong in a toothpaste ad. Of all the guys, I like drawing Twitchy best (even though it's hard because he's constantly moving, running around or playing with that butterfly knife he

stole off a Filipino guy, though he had to turn that in because it was considered contraband) because when he moves, you can see every shadow in his forearms, his shoulders, his back.

I'm almost two blocks from Webster Street, the unofficial border of the neighborhood, when I realize I've got four white guys following me.

I think of running for it, but I'm afraid I'll look guilty if I run, and I'm not guilty of anything but being born with this face, so I just lengthen my stride and try to act natural, or as natural as I can when I'm being tailed by a bunch of guys I'm sure want to jump me, but I only get another ten yards by the time the ketos catch up to me.

Think, Minnow. If I'd run for it, maybe I would've already made it to Japantown, where there's always someone hanging around. Maybe I would've found Shig and Twitchy or Stan Katsumoto. Maybe they would've stopped whatever's about to happen.

I swallow, hard. I'm not as small as Tommy Harano, but I'm smaller than Mas and Shig were when they were fourteen, and the ketos outnumber me four-to-one.

I look around for help and see some guys on the opposite corner—they have black hair and brown eyes like me, but they're wearing big round buttons that say I am Chinese.

They catch me staring. I wonder if I should call to them, but my mouth's so dry, I think if I open it, the only thing that'll come out is dust.

While I hesitate, they turn and run the other direction. From behind, they look just like Japanese guys. They could be from my neighborhood. They could be my friends or cousins or brothers.

But they're not.

I back up, clutching my sketchbook, as the ketos surround me.

"Whatcha got there, Jap?"

The word is hard, like a wet palm striking me on the cheek.

I'm so dazed by it, I don't answer, and the guy grabs my sketchpad. I lunge forward, but he's taller than me, and he snatches it out of my reach while the other boys laugh.

The first guy has a gap in his front teeth and a leather jacket that looks brand-new. He

riffles through the pages, and I know he's seeing my friends, my family, my Ocean Beach, my cemeteries, my Japantown chimneys, my many studies of the Golden Gate Bridge, my city, the city that I love.

Rrrrrip. He tears a drawing from the spine, and I cringe. The sketchbook was a present from Dad, before he died.

"You spying on us, Jap?" the gap-toothed guy says, shoving the sketch in my face. "You gonna send these back to the emperor?"

I look at the drawing—it's of the bridge—and the only thing I can think is that I didn't get the perspective right. The farther tower looks flimsy and out of proportion, like it wouldn't be able to hold up to the weight of all its promises.

Before I can answer, he pulls the bridge back again and draws a knife on me. The blade's over four inches—if he were Japanese, it'd be contraband.

For some reason, I start laughing.

"You think that's funny?" he says, advancing on me. "I'll show you funny."

I stop laughing as the other ketos grab me from behind.

I try to fight them, but the next thing I know, I'm flat on my back and the sidewalk's cold under me. The first guy's on top of me, sneering, and I'm struggling to breathe.

I'm still fighting, or at least I think I am, but suddenly he rears back and then there's three bright blossoms of pain in the right side of my face. For a second, I see blood-red suns against the white San Francisco sky, feel the thin sliver of a knife against my cheek.

"Wanna see what real Americans do to Jap spies?" the gap-toothed guy growls.

I AM AN AMERICAN

I'm seeing Mr. Katsumoto's sign again. I want to write it everywhere: on my forehead—I AM AN AMERICAN—on the white sky—I AM AN AMERICAN—on the windows of Sutro Baths—I AM AN AMERICAN.

But that won't make them see me. That won't stop them from killing me, if they can.

The only good Jap is a dead Jap.

I start bucking and screaming. I shout for Shig, Mas, Twitchy, Stan, Frankie Fujita—

Then the first guy punches me again, and my head lolls to the side. In the gutter, my sketchpad lies face-down, pages wrinkled beneath it.

I can see bits and pieces of my rumpled drawings—a view of the bridge from the Presidio on the north edge of the city, Mas in his football uniform, the Dutch windmills along the shoreline, Twitchy running down Buchanan Street at midnight, going so fast I drew him blurry, like a spirit you see only as you're turning a corner, and when you look again, he's gone.

Ten days ago, President Roosevelt established the War Relocation Authority, a federal agency that's supposed to be in charge of figuring out how to get us out of military zones where the government doesn't want us. We just don't know which of us they'll move. Or how it's going to happen. Or when.

Some people say they'll take only Isseis like Mom. But what about their American-born kids? We'll have to go wherever our parents do. Maybe Shigeo and I could stay in San Francisco with Mas, since he's over eighteen. But none of us would ever leave Mom alone.

Some people say we'll only have to go a little ways inland, but Stan Katsumoto told us his Sacramento family has heard rumors they'll have to evacuate too. They'll have to abandon their farm at the start of the fruit season—no strawberries, no apricots, no candy-sweet peaches dripping juice. Maybe we'll all have to leave California.

I've never been beyond the Sierra Nevada. What would it be like, walking down the block and not smelling sembei baking in the Shungetsu-do confectionary? Going to school and not seeing the rust-colored tips of the bridge jutting out of the fog? Not tasting the salt air of the Pacific Ocean on every breath?

I don't want to leave. No one else does either, not Mom, who's been here for over twenty years, not Mas or Shig or any of our pals.

Why should we have to, when we're Americans like anyone else?

I know the answer, and I hate the answer: because we're Japs, enemy aliens.

Because we look like us.

The sounds of yelping and shouting reach me as if through a haze. I barely notice until the weight on my chest eases, and suddenly everything is very sharp and very loud. The ketos are flying away like leaves on the wind.

Someone grabs me, and at first I try to struggle, but then I realize it's Mas. He's half dragging, half carrying me across the street while the other guys run after the ketos, hurling rocks and soda bottles. He's strong enough to pick me up, but I'm glad he doesn't. The fellas would never let me live it down if they saw me cradled in Mas's arms like a baby.

Mas has had to grow up fast these past two years. Unlike Shig and me, Mas is a brain. He was in his first semester at UC Berkeley when Dad died. After that, Mas had to drop out and take over Dad's job as a gardener to help Mom with the finances. He tries to be like Dad and keep me and Shig out of trouble, especially now, except Dad was made of warm, soft pine instead of stone.

Finally, we make it across Webster Street, and Mas sets me down on the steps of Mr. Hidekawa's apartment. The FBI picked up Mr. Hidekawa the same night they got Mr. Oishi. One of our community leaders, Mr. Hidekawa served in the military in the First World War, hoping he'd get his citizenship. (He didn't.) When he heard the authorities were coming for him, he dug out his old jacket and trousers, polished his boots, and met them at the door as a uniformed U.S. Army veteran.

They took him all the same.

Mr. Hidekawa's apartment is empty now. His neighbors, the Yamadas and the Tadachis, are looking after his place. Their house is like a lot of the others in Japantown, with decorative cornices and bay windows from the Victorian era. The buildings here are all so similar, but I like the little details that make them different: the fluting on some entryway columns, the ornamented brackets, the turtle-shaped bell over Mr. Hidekawa's door. It's those details I'll miss if we have to leave.

Mas steps back onto the sidewalk, like he needs some distance to really size me up. He

must have just gotten back from his job, because he's got dirt on his forearms and the knees of his pants. Normally, he showers and dresses in clean, neatly ironed shirts and trousers as soon as he gets home, even if he's not going out again. That's something Dad used to do—he took a lot of pride in looking tidy. "What happened? Why'd they attack you?" he says.

Trust Mas to blame *me* for getting jumped.

"Nothing. I was walking home and—"

"Why didn't you take a bus?"

I shrug.

I must look more messed up than I think, because Mas doesn't yell at me like I expect him to. Instead, he whips out a handkerchief and begins rubbing my face. "How many times do I have to tell you, Minnow? You have to—"

I was walking! I want to shout. *I was just walking!*

But what comes out is this: "We could do everything right, and they'd still think we were dangerous."

Mas stops. His face kind of cracks, and I see that underneath the layer of anger, he's scared. Really scared. I wish I had my sketchpad right now, so I could draw that bright rift of fear that's running through his core like a vein of silver.

But he closes up again as Shig comes over to us and takes the handkerchief. "Jeez, Mas! You're roughing him up worse than the ketos." He plants the sketchbook in my arms. "Here, Minnow."

The covers are bent, and the pages are damp with gutter water. "Thanks," I whisper.

He plops down on the stoop beside me and dabs gently at my cheekbone.

Shig's not as handsome as Twitchy or Mas, but I think he's the most well-liked fella in our group. It's all in his manner—he's got an easy, crooked smile, and an easy way of talking, like there's no place in the world he'd rather be than right here, with you. He's not good at school or sports or anything, but Shigeo is good at *people.* He could walk down any street in Japantown, greet everybody by name, and ask after every one of their kids, grandkids, gardens, and hobbies.

"You didn't bleed on him, did you?" Shig asks me, glancing sidelong at Mas with his heavily lidded eyes. "I got blood on his favorite shirt once and he nearly flipped his wig."

Mas crosses his arms. “Blood, huh? I could’ve sworn it was paint, because *you* thought it would be funny to change the color of my outfit right before the Senior Ball.”

“Oh yeah.” Shigeo grins. “That *was* funny.”

Before Mas can reply, the rest of the guys come sauntering back across Webster Street. They’re all between sixteen and twenty years old, and, except for Frankie Fujita, who moved here when he was ten, they all grew up together in Japantown.

“Got this for you, Minnow.” Twitchy Hashimoto unfolds the crumpled drawing of the Golden Gate Bridge, smoothing it a couple of times on his thigh, and hands it back to me.

“Thanks.” As I take it, I notice that the other side is filled with sketches of him doing tricks with his butterfly knife. I guess I draw Twitchy a lot.

Blushing, I slide the page into the sketchbook and clap the covers closed.

“That’s a nice shiner you got,” Twitchy says.

Gingerly, I touch the side of my face, where the skin is warm and swollen. “You think so?”

He just laughs and ruffles my hair and skips up a couple of Mr. Hidekawa’s steps before sliding down the banister again.

“You’re all right now, Minnow,” says Tommy with a small grin. “We’ve got you.”

Seeing Tommy smile cheers me up a bit. Tommy’s sixteen, but looking at him, you wouldn’t know it. He’s small and nervous, with round eyes that are too big for his face. If he can smile at a time like this, so can I. “How’d you guys know I was in trouble?” I ask.

“Some Chinese guys came running over, saying the white boys were at it again,” Mas answers.

I remember their buttons—I am Chinese—and the backs of their heads. I guess they didn’t abandon me after all.

Frankie Fujita strolls up then, hands jammed in his pockets. I’ve got a few drawings of Frankie, and in them he always looks like he’s spoiling for a fight: blazing comets for eyes, high cheekbones, hair he wears long and messy like the guys in Mom’s woodblock prints. Sometimes I think he should’ve been born into another era, when he could’ve made fighting his whole life. That boy likes fighting more than almost anything. He’ll fight ketos, Chinese, Mexicans, blacks, anybody. He’s nineteen, and after Pearl Harbor, he wanted to sign up to

fight the Japanese and the Germans and the Italians, but the government reclassified us from A-1 to C-4, making us all "enemy aliens" (even though people like Frankie and me and the guys are Nisei, second-generation Japanese-American citizens), so he couldn't fight anybody.

Before moving here, Frankie grew up in New York, where he was getting in so much trouble that his parents sent him out West to live with his uncle, hoping California life would tame him some. He could've gone back to New York when President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 back in February and all those rumors about evacuation started, but he didn't. He stayed with the boys.

I don't like him much, but you can't say he's not loyal.

He crosses his arms, and his anger flares in his eyes. "Goddamn ketos."

"But thank God for Chinese guys, huh?" Shig winks at me.

Stan Katsumoto clasps his hands in front of him like he's in the front pew at Sunday services. Behind his glasses, his smart black eyes shine like a crow's. "Dear Heavenly Father," he intones, "we thank you for this day, all the blessings you have given us, and Chinese guys."

Twitchy laughs. He's got a great laugh. It shakes you a little at first, and then you feel all the restless bits of your soul settle like grains of rice in a washing pot. "I've got half a mind to steal a few of those buttons," he says, "just so the ketos'll leave us alone."

Tommy frowns. "We don't look Chinese."

In *PM Magazine,* Dr. Seuss, the kids' book author, has been drawing us with pig noses and wiry mustaches, queuing up for boxes of TNT. There are all sorts of cartoons like that. Sometimes we look like pigs, sometimes monkeys, sometimes rats.

We never look like us.

Stan leans back against the banister, spinning one finger like it's a roulette wheel. "Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino . . . Who wants to guess who the ketos are going after next week?"

Stan's smart, maybe even smarter than Mas, and he uses his smarts to make jokes, skipping along the surfaces of things like a stone over water, so they barely touch him. But he wasn't joking the day he helped his father hang the sign at Katsumoto Co.: I AM AN

AMERICAN.

"Next week?" Frankie grunts. "There won't be a 'next week' for much longer if they kick us outta here."

And just like that, the conversation turns, as it always does these days, to the evacuation.

"I heard the Bainbridge Japanese only got six days to pack," Tommy says.

Bainbridge is this little island in Washington. Last Saturday, their Japanese got the first exclusion order, telling them they'd have to leave their homes.

Their homes.

Our homes.

"What hard-working nihonjin *can't* pack up their whole life in six days?" Stan clicks his tongue. "Bad Asians."

"Maybe we won't . . ." Tommy doesn't finish his sentence. We all know we're going to get that exclusion order one day, even though, at the same time, we hope that day never comes.

"Anybody know where they're going?" Mas asks.

"Owens Valley got some 'volunteers' last weekend." Twitchy makes quotation marks with his fingers when he says the word "volunteers."

The Owens Valley Reception Center is near Kings Canyon National Park. I've never been there, but at least it's still in California.

I hate myself a little bit for thinking that. For trying to convince myself the situation isn't as bad as it is.

Because it *is* bad. Really bad. That's why Mas is so angry and so scared. It's so bad that being an American won't protect you when you have faces like ours.

I was walking!

I was just *walking.*

I've never broken the law. I'm a pretty good student, despite what Mas will tell you. I keep to myself. I mind my own business.

I'm a *good* Japanese.

I'm a good *American.*

But that won't be enough, will it? To keep me here? To make them leave me alone?

"Think we'll go to Owens Valley too?" Tommy asks. "That's not far."

"It's far enough," Stan says.

A silence falls over us, and in my head, I do a sketch of the guys. We're on Mr. Hidekawa's steps, and all around us, our eight-p.m. curfew approaches in dark clouds of charcoal.

"Come on." Mas gestures to Shig and me. "You two have homework to do." Then he smacks me on the back, harder than he needs to, but now I know it's not because he's angry with me.

It's because the ketos could come back for us.

It's because we could all be rounded up, no matter how many laws we obey or what grades we have. It doesn't matter how good we are, because they see only what they want to see, and when they look at us, all they see are Japs.

"Why bother?" Shig laughs. "Where they're sending us, maybe there's no school."

Mas gives him a hard look. "Because we won't be there forever."

As we head down the street, we take in the neighborhood: the hotels with lighted signs buzzing in the fog, the churches advertising next Sunday's services like we won't be herded off any day now, the smells of hot sesame oil and grilled fish wafting from the nearest restaurants.

Frankie stuffs his hands into his pockets. "Sure gonna miss this place when Uncle Sam kicks us out."

That night, after Mom, Mas, and Shig have gone to bed, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror, studying my reflection. The skin around my right eye's purple as an eggplant. It's so swollen, my eye's turned into a slit I can hardly see through.

If you cover the left side of my face, I look like the guy from the Sutro's ad.

When I leave the bathroom, I don't go back to the room Shig and I share. I sit in the living room, open my sketchbook to a blank page, and begin to draw.

The paper's wrinkled with water damage, but that doesn't stop me.

I draw myself, today, on March 26, 1942. It's an ugly portrait, cobbled together out of scraps: I'm a Seussian sketch; I'm a woodblock samurai; I'm the bruised kid in the mirror.

I draw Japantown, the dry-goods stores, the restaurants, the dentists and beauty salons, the lamps dangling like teardrops in the fog.

I draw Mas, and he looks tired.

I draw the bombing of Pearl Harbor and a burning Honimaru.

I draw Frankie in his father's WWI 82nd Infantry uniform, the double-*A* "All-American" patch sewn onto the left shoulder, fighting boys who could be his brothers.

I draw Twitchy—he's racing barefoot across Ocean Beach with seagulls flying before him.

I draw my favorite places in this city I call home: the George Washington High School bleachers, Lands End, Katsumoto Co., the Victorians, the Golden Gate . . .

And when I'm done, I tear my self-portrait from my sketchbook and light a match. I set fire to the page and stuff it into the fireplace, where the flames blacken the edges, consuming my Jap skin, my Jap eyes, my family, my friends, my city, my bridge . . . and we all go up in smoke.