

DESERT JEWELS

Chapter 9

“Oh, no!” Emi gasped as she read the notice tied to the telephone pole. “It’s really happening.”

Ruth walked over and read out loud, “Civil Exclusion Order Number 19.”

They both read silently for a few minutes before Ruth gasped, too. “You can’t leave by May 1st. That’s only ten days away, and nobody can pack up and move that fast.”

“We have to.” Emi’s hands shook, and she steadied her books just before they fell. “I don’t even know where we’re going. Not after Tanforan, anyway.”

“Tanforan?”

“It’s a race track. One of the Nisei reporters on Papa’s newspaper told Mama that’s where people from the Bay Area have to go until the government builds a better place.”

Ruth’s shoulders slumped. “Your mother isn’t Japanese. Can’t you stay in Berkeley?”

Scratching in the dirt with her shoe, Emi shook her head. “Mama can, but I can’t. See that?” She pointed to a line on the poster. “It says ‘all persons of Japanese ancestry.’ That means all Nikkei, including me. Someone told Mama that even one sixteenth Japanese blood was enough.”

“My grandma is German, and we’re fighting them, too. Why don’t Mom and I have to go?”

Emi shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“They aren’t treating you fair.”

“If you’re Japanese, fair doesn’t matter.”



When Emi reached home, Mrs. Hamilton was in her yard planting flowers. She must have seen Emi, but the neighbor didn’t look over or say hello.

Emi ran into the house. “Mama, Mama, are you home yet?”

Her mother called from the parlor. “I just got here.”

“Did you see it?”

“The notice? Yes.” Mama wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “I was just looking at our furniture and wondering what to do with it when we’re evacuated.”

Emi scowled. “How are we supposed to take care of everything in ten days?”

As the sun sent a shaft of light onto the sofa, Mama stared at it. “We’ve known this was coming, so I’ve already been thinking about the problem. I don’t have it all figured out, yet, though.”

Pumpkin strutted into the room and rubbed against Emi’s legs. She picked him up and petted him.

Mama slumped into a chair. “You do know . . .” She stopped and swallowed. “You do know that pets aren’t allowed? We can’t take Pumpkin with us.”

Tears flowed from Emi’s eyes. “Can’t they make an exception? I’ve already lost Papa. I don’t want to lose Pumpkin, too.”

"You haven't lost Papa. He's away for a while, but he'll come back. Pumpkin will also be okay. We'll find him a good home." Mama thought a moment. "How about Ruth?"

"She'd love him, but her father's allergic to cats."

"Mrs. Hamilton's lonely with her husband away on business so often. Maybe she'd take Pumpkin."

"She'd kill him!"

"Emi! You know that isn't true."

Hugging the cat tighter, Emi ignored his squirming. "Maybe she wouldn't kill him, but she's been mean to us ever since Pearl Harbor. I won't let her hurt Pumpkin."

Mama looked sad. "Ignoring us isn't the same as being mean, and I think she'd take good care of your pet. If you don't want her to have him, though, we'll find someone else."

"Maybe Mr. and Mrs. Campbell will take him." Emi scratched Pumpkin behind the ears. "I'll ask them."

Just then the telephone rang. After answering, Mama said, "I'm glad you called."

She listened for several minutes. Her side of the conversation consisted of "I understand" and "thank you" and ended with "I hope you find good tenants."

After replacing the receiver, Mama stood silently for a moment before speaking. "That was our landlord. He wanted me to know that he'd hold the house for us if he could, but nobody knows how long we'll be gone. Mr. Bennett has to rent it to someone else so he can pay the mortgage."

"But you and Papa have lived here since before I was born."

"Mr. Bennett said he's sorry to lose us as tenants." Mama hugged Emi. "He asked me to understand, and I do. He has no choice."

Mama walked into the kitchen and gazed at the appliances. "He offered me a fair price for the stove, refrigerator, and washing machine if I leave them in the house."

She ran her hand over the countertop by the sink. "I've lived here for fourteen years, and most of the memories are good ones. I'll miss this place."



Saturday morning, Mama hurried as she cleaned up the breakfast dishes. "Brush your teeth, Emi. We're going to the First Congregational Church this morning to register for the evacuation."

"Why do I have to go with you?" Emi whined. "I can stay home by myself."

"It isn't safe. The war makes some people do crazy things."

Emi had heard the stories of violence against Japanese Americans. This neighborhood had been safe so far, but arguing with Mama never worked.

When they arrived at the church, there was an armed soldier at the curb and two at the door where they entered. Emi grabbed Mama's hand and held tight.

Inside, a Caucasian woman hurried up to them. "Are you here to pass out sandwiches? Come this way."

Mama shook her head. "I'm registering."

People kept mistaking Mama for a helper and giving her puzzled looks when they found out why she was there. But after a while, someone handed her a pink ticket that said "44" and told her to have a seat until her number was called.

While they waited, women from the church walked around serving sandwiches and tea.

Emi leaned her head on her mother's shoulder. "Do I have to go to school next week?"

"Yes. Education is important." Mama rubbed Emi's hand. "I told my principal that I would teach through Wednesday. That will give me all day Thursday to finish packing, and you can take the day off to help." She sighed. "My poor students. I hope they have a good substitute teacher for the rest of the school year."

"Forty-four," a voice called. "Number forty-four."

The man behind the desk looked up in surprise as Mama sat down. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm registering."

"But you're . . . you're white."

"And my daughter is half Japanese."

The man squirmed in his chair. "She can register with relatives, or there's a home at the Manzanar War Relocation Center for children without anyone to look after them. I don't think I can register a Caucasian."

A squeak came from Emi's mouth as she clung to Mama. Go with Aunt Benko and Uncle Taro? Or to an orphanage? Mama would never agree to that. But what if she didn't have a choice?

Mama sat up straighter and looked the man in the eye. "I'm going where my daughter goes."

He stood up. "Let me get my supervisor."

When he returned, he was accompanied by a sour-looking man wearing a black suit and a frown.

The official stood towering over Mama. "This registration is only for those of Japanese ancestry."

"I will not desert my child."

The man's frown grew deeper. "Do you have friends or relatives outside the restricted area?"

"My parents live in Chicago."

"I may be able to get a pass for the two of you to go there."

Mama stared him down. "It isn't that simple. The FBI took my husband away, and he is in your custody. I won't desert him, either."

The official's face grew even sterner, but he looked away before Mama did.

Gripping the arms of her chair, Mama asked, "When he is released, they will send him to the same place we're going, won't they?"

"If he is released, he might go there."

"When he is released, Emi and I will be waiting for him."

The entire room had grown silent. The official looked around, then glared at Mama. "The camps aren't a good place for Caucasians to live."

Mama glared back. "Then the government should be ashamed of itself. If the camps aren't good enough for Caucasians, they aren't good enough for Nikkei, either." She crossed her arms. "I am going."

The official shrugged. "If you choose to stay with your daughter, you will be treated the same as the Japanese."

"Fine."

After the official walked away, the first man took down Mama's information and gave her several tags. "When you arrive on Friday, you and your daughter should each be wearing one. The others go on your baggage."

By the time they left, Mama and Emi had become family number 13591.