

Chapter 1



“I THINK IT MIGHT BE a good idea for us to attend the Remembrance Day ceremony this year.”

The total unexpectedness of his father’s words were like a thunderbolt, and all Johnny Anders could do was sputter, “But Dad, that’s my birthday.”

“That’s exactly why I think we should go. After all, you were born on a very historic day, Johnny, and don’t you think we owe it to those men and women who gave so much for us, to spare them an hour of our time?”

“Yeah, but it’s all old stuff that happened a long time ago. What’s it got to do with me?”

“It has a lot to do with you. Those men and women and

what they did are the reason we are able to enjoy the life we do today.”

Johnny rebelled inwardly at the thought of spending his fourteenth birthday standing around watching some old men going on about something that happened so long ago. He was not quite ready to give up, and tried one more protest. “But Dad, it’s just going to be a lot of old people talking about stuff that means nothing to me. Anyway, we don’t fight wars any more.”

“Well, bad news for you: you have just given me a perfect example of how much you have to learn. It may have escaped your attention, young man, but there are a lot of our men and women, some not that much older than you, fighting in a place called Afghanistan right now. Now everyone might not agree one hundred percent that they should be there, but most people agree, at least, that we should support them while they are there. And one way to do that is by going to that ceremony.”

A stubborn look had come into his father’s eyes that Johnny knew all too well. With a sinking feeling, he realized that although his father hadn’t actually insisted that Johnny accept his idea, further protesting at this time would get him nowhere.

As soon as supper was over that night, Johnny took off to his room, claiming he had a homework assignment. But when he closed his door he flung himself onto his bed.

Staring at the ceiling, he racked his brain for a way out of

this disaster that had befallen him. He had to admit that he indeed knew almost nothing about the war in Afghanistan, let alone the two world wars and the other wars that were fought in this century and the last one. The truth was that he usually found himself daydreaming in history class — in all his classes, to be exact. His teachers' words seemed to float over his head and he was often caught staring into space. He became the butt of many jokes made by his teachers and classmates. He was shy and he had few friends — and even fewer A's on his report cards.

But going to the Remembrance Day Parade on his birthday would not make him feel any better. Briefly he considered pretending he was sick, as he had done several years ago to get out of a party for a girl named Maize Bledsoe, whom he couldn't stand. But just as quickly he dismissed the idea, muttering to himself, *Yeah, but I was just a kid then. It would be stupid now. Anyway, they'd probably do the same thing*, the "same thing" being that his parents had insisted he stay in bed all the next day to make sure he got over the illness. Johnny had long since figured out that they had known all along he was faking and had just kept him in bed as punishment.

When his mother put her head around the door to remind him it was getting late, Johnny was no closer to a solution that would prevent this shadow from hanging over his birthday. After getting into bed, he lay for a long time staring out his window into the darkness.

It was the smell that brought Johnny awake — a bitter, acrid smell of burning that filled the bedroom. Bolting upright, he became aware of a figure standing silently at the foot of the bed. Although it was dark, he could see the man quite clearly and realized that the smell was coming from the tattered uniform he wore. His first feeling was one of terror, and yet there was something emanating from this apparition that told Johnny he wasn't in any danger.

Suddenly the man stretched out a blackened hand. Astounded at himself, Johnny climbed out of bed and meekly took it. But as startling as all this was, it did not prepare him for what came next. The man led him toward his bedroom wall and then straight through it.

Before Johnny could even exclaim at this impossibility, he was shaken by the sound of explosions and the sight of flames shooting up into the night sky. He became aware that he was standing on a balcony overlooking a strange city. Curiosity overcame his fear and astonishment, and he whispered to the man, "Where are we?"

"We are in Hong Kong. It is December 1941 and the city has just fallen to the Japanese."

Johnny wasn't so ignorant of history that he didn't know Japan had been an enemy in the Second World War, but his knowledge of what had gone on in Hong Kong was zero. He was just about to ask another question when he realized they weren't alone.

On the far side of the balcony he could just make out a

short but powerful-looking man who was leaning over the railing and staring down into the street. "What is he looking at?" Johnny whispered.

"You don't have to whisper. He can't hear us. Go over and see for yourself."

As he reached the railing, Johnny heard a plaintive cry.

"Water, please, some water."

Leaning over, Johnny made out the figure of a soldier on the ground. A building at the end of the street suddenly burst into flame, lighting up the man, who was obviously badly wounded. But what startled Johnny more was the insignia on his shoulder: "Canada."

As he turned to ask the soldier-ghost about the insignia, he saw the short man who had been watching straighten up and stride toward the door behind him. But before he could go far, he was brought back to the railing by shouts from the street below.

Both he and Johnny craned forward and saw a group of soldiers running toward the wounded Canadian.

"Japanese soldiers," the soldier-ghost explained.

The Japanese surrounded the soldier, and one, an officer, reached behind him to where a water bottle was hanging. But to Johnny's horror the man's hand reappeared holding a pistol. Without a trace of emotion the officer pointed the pistol at the wounded Canadian's head and pulled the trigger.

The short man and Johnny both recoiled at what they

had just witnessed. But whereas Johnny's reaction was horror, the man's appeared to be fury; he slapped the railing hard and strode angrily through the door.

Johnny looked enquiringly at his soldier-ghost.

"He's angry because he is also Canadian."

This surprised Johnny. With the light from the burning building illuminating the balcony, the man looked like he was of Chinese origin.

The soldier-ghost answered Johnny's unspoken question. "He was born in Vancouver of Chinese parents and his name is Bill Chong."

"What's he doing here?"

"His father died while in China on business. As the number one son, Bill was sent over to look after the funeral. Unfortunately for him, by the time he had got through all the red tape, the Japanese already controlled the sea, and Bill had no way to get back to Canada."

"What will he do now?"

"Nothing immediately. But what he just saw will spur him to try to escape Hong Kong and get back to Canada so that he can fight in the war."

"Will he succeed?"

"Not in the way he expects."

"How then?"

"We will have to wait and see. For now, I want you to see something else."

With that the soldier-ghost took Johnny's hand again, and suddenly they were standing in a fenced compound