

# EARTHQUAKE SHACK

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—*Kirkus Reviews*



## SUSIE HARA

A Sadie García Miller Mystery

## **Praise for *Earthquake Shack***

“Sadie [is] an inspired mashup. Readers [will] have fun skulking around San Francisco with her.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Reading *Earthquake Shack* felt like wandering through the best foggy San Francisco morning—layered, unpredictable and full of unexpected magic. Investigator Sadie García Miller is our gritty, little-bit-psychic, lovable queer sleuth who finds lost objects. The mystery of a stolen house is as bizarre as it is compelling, and the book doesn’t stop there. Susie Hara captures the city in all its complexity, from the fog-drenched avenues in the Sunset to the gentrified streets of the Mission. The City isn’t just a place or a backdrop. It’s a living, haunted character. Queer, bicultural and grounded in San Francisco’s compelling history, this is a mystery for people who want a good story that keeps them on their toes.”

—Virgie Tovar, author of *The Body Positive Journal*

“*Earthquake Shack* is a unique love letter to the San Francisco of our past, present and future, not to mention a rollicking ride with a vibrant cast of characters. Fun, queer and unforgettable, the novel is a must-read for historians, romantics and diehard locals.”

—Brittany Newell, author of *Soft Core*



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**SUSIE HARA**

*A Sadie García Miller Mystery*



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Recovering the past, creating the future

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# EARTHQUAKE SHACK





## Chapter 1

I was in the back room of my Valencia Street storefront when the Tibetan bells clanged, signaling a visitor. I came out to my front office to the scent of cigar smoke. An eighty-something man wearing a plaid jacket and an air of confidence nodded to me. Beside him was a buttoned-up woman with a steely edge. She was around my age, in her fifties. *Dios mío*, who were they?

“Good morning, Sadie,” the man said.

“It’s Sadie *García Miller*. And who are you?”

“Your cousin. Al Miller. It’s been a lot of years since we seen each other in Brooklyn. You were just a *kind*.”

Yiddish for a kid. It was all coming back to me. He was my dad’s cousin. “I remember you. How could I forget? You called me Dolly.”

He grinned, showing his extra-white dentures. “Maybe I was kind of a putz back then. I don’t do that no more. My daughters are feminists. They trained me not to say dolly, or sweetheart, or ...”

“Dad,” the woman said with a stern look. She turned to me with a cool half smile. “I’m your cousin Ruth.”

“Nice to meet you,” I lied. “What can I do for you?” A figure of speech, because I was not going to do anything for



them. I couldn't and wouldn't break the promise I'd made to my grandpa so many years ago.

"We heard you're the finder of lost objects," Ruth said. "We need something found, right here in Frisco."

Don't call it Frisco, I thought. "How did you find me?"

My storefront was on the outer edge of San Francisco's Mission District, on Valencia Street near Cesar Chavez. Unlike the so-called Valencia Corridor, full of hip restaurants and overpriced boutiques, my neighborhood included a mortuary, a Christian rehab program and a motorcycle repair shop. I deliberately didn't have an online presence, although my niece kept insisting I should and was working on a website for me.

"I checked around with my Silicon Valley connections," Ruth said. "They knew about you ... your uncanny ability to find lost things."

*Híjole*, this was weird. How could Silicon Valley people know about me? It wasn't like I was a rock star. Most of my business was word-of-mouth. Were my cousins tracking me? It was creepy. Then I remembered there had been a case involving a software mogul's ex-wife. I had located and delivered her missing ring, a family heirloom passed down from her Egyptian grandmother. Or, depending on how you looked at it, you might say I *liberated* her ring from the ex-husband's mansion.

"Unfortunately, I'm not available to find your missing thing." Another lie.

Al raised his eyebrows at me. "The pandemic. It hit small businesses pretty hard. I'll bet you could use some work." He shrugged and spread his hands, palms up. "Am I right?"

*Verdad*. He was right. I'd used up the Paycheck Protection Program money and yeah, I needed *trabajo*. But there was no way I would work for these two.

The last time I saw my cousin Al, I was fifteen, and he and my grandfather were arguing in the kitchen of the Flatbush apartment where I lived with Grandpa. "How could you do

such a thing?” my grandfather said. When Grandpa was angry, the volume was low, but all the fury was funneled into his voice like a stealth weapon.

Al yelled, “Saul, you’re *meshuga*. It wasn’t *us*, it was *them*.”

After more volleys, Al banged out the door. I asked Grandpa what they were fighting about. He just shook his head sadly and told me I should never *ever* talk to Cousin Al or anyone on that side of the family. When I asked why, he answered with a solemn face. “Two words: Jewish Mafia.”

Now, a few decades later, I searched for something, anything I could say that would get my cousins out of my office and out of my life.

Just then, Al turned his eyes on me with a laser focus. “Saydela. Your father? He didn’t die in a car accident. Do this job for us, and we’ll tell you who murdered him.”

## Chapter 2

Fuck. I tried to speak but choked on my words. I'd always suspected my dad was killed because of his work for the labor union. Tía Gloria and my dad's friends tried to talk me out of that idea. They said it was a car accident, case closed.

I gestured to my two guest chairs, thrift shop specials. "Have a seat."

I sank onto the large fitness ball behind my desk. My hands shaking, I took my smokes out of the desk drawer. Before I could find a match, Al pulled out a gold lighter and lit my cigarette. Inhaling the welcome warmth and calm, I blew out the smoke and braced myself.

I would never want to go against my grandpa's wishes, but still, I had to find out what Al and Ruth knew or didn't know about my father's death.

Al settled into the chair, his potbelly straining the seams of his shirt. He patted his front shirt pocket and pulled out a cigar. "Mind if I smoke this?"

I lifted out a large, cut-glass ashtray from a drawer and placed it on the desk between us.

He laughed. "This is fan-tas-tic. No one lets me smoke inside no more."

Ruth shook her head. "Disgusting habit."

“If you want, we can go outside and smoke,” I said.

“No, it’s fine,” she said.

“Okay, let’s schmooze,” Al said. He unwrapped the cigar.

I opened the window and turned on the fan. Back at my desk, I inhaled and blew the smoke toward the ceiling. It was a cool, overcast morning, but I was sweating.

“What do you know about my dad’s death?”

Al held his cigar over the ashtray and clipped the end. It fell with a plop. “Let’s talk about the job first.”

He lit the cigar and took a short puff. The scent wafting toward me reminded me of my grandpa, who’d taken me in after my dad died. I still missed him. I began to warm to cousin Al in spite of myself.

Ruth spoke up. “Here’s the deal. We want you to find ...”

“I’m sorry, but I have to stop you right there. I can’t take your job.” It wasn’t just the promise to my grandpa. More than that, it was my belief in doing the right thing. There was no way I was going to get involved with organized criminals. Or even disorganized ones.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Al said, “but we’re all legit now.” He took another puff on his cigar.

How the hell did he know what I was thinking?

“We run strictly legal online businesses,” he continued. “My daughters take care of the management side and my granddaughter does the technical stuff. You know, the hardware, the software, the social media.”

“I handle the West Coast office,” Ruth added.

If everything was online, why did they need a presence on the West Coast? I didn’t entirely believe them, but still, I had to steer the conversation back to what mattered. “You said my father was murdered. Who did it?”

“We’ll get to that. But first, about our businesses: we’ve diversified,” Al said.

Yeah, right. “How so?”

Ruth cut in. "Educational services, web hosting, dating services ... that kind of thing."

Really? All of that? Did the online businesses serve as a front? My grandfather had never explained what exactly the family businesses were. Aunt Miriam, my dad's sister, had always refused to talk about it. Once, when I pressed her, she said, "It's bad, but it's not drugs. That's all I'm gonna say." It was part of the family lore that some of the relatives had worked with Meyer Lansky and his gang back in the thirties. Maybe that was true and maybe it wasn't.

My stomach was in a knot, and a thought came to me: what if they had their goons outside? I glanced out the window but didn't see anyone. I got up and paced the small room.

"I don't think I can do this job."

"I remember your father," Ruth said. "We all looked up to Josh."

"You knew my dad?"

"Sure. His family lived across the street. Josh was our older cousin, more like a cool uncle, who used to babysit us sometimes. We'd play board games. Clue and Parcheesi. Then he went to law school and moved out to California, and we never saw him again. I always admired him, it made me want to move west. It was terrible what happened. I could kill the motherfucker who ..."

Al gave a microscopic shake of his head, and Ruth stopped cold.

"Sadie." Al clasped his hands and placed them on the desk between us. "Please, sit. You're making me nervous."

I went back and sat down on the ball. Stubbing out my cigarette, I took a deep breath. "What can you tell me about my father's death?" I took out a pen and my notebook.

"First, we talk about the job, then we'll get to that," Al said.

Damn. I took a deep breath and blew it out. "I'm not saying I'll take the job, but I would like to hear what you're looking for." I jotted down the date and time in my notebook and asked him, "What did you lose?"

Ruth said, "It was me."

I turned to her. "What have you lost?"

"My house."

"A foreclosure? I'm sorry. But that's a financial loss, and it's not my area. I find *physical* things that are lost—a piece of jewelry, a book, a sentimental object, a work of art. That sort of thing."

Ruth leaned forward. "Yes, we know. The house is *physically* gone. Vamoose. Stolen."

"Whoa." Okay, I was intrigued in spite of everything.

"They hauled away her house when she was out of town on a business trip," Al said. "Can you believe it? *Meshuga*. You know from *meshuga*, right? From your Jewish half? You got the Mexican side and the Jewish side. I met your mother once, by the way. What a woman! She was really something."

Jesus. I wasn't sure I liked him talking about Mamá that way. But there were so few people in my life who had known her that I had a soft spot for anyone who had. "She was?"

"Sure. Lupe was beautiful, smart, all that," he said. "She had an accent but her English was perfect. There's a picture of you and her picketing the Safeway store during the farm-workers' strike. You were maybe four or five. Yeah. I still have the photo. It was a shame she died so young." He took another puff of his cigar.

I shook my head. I couldn't get over how much he knew about me. Sadie, focus, I told myself. Get back on the case, or, at least, the potential case. I turned to Ruth. "Wait, let me make sure I understand. You're saying someone came and stole your house? Like they put it on a giant flatbed and took it away?"

"Yes. That's what I'm saying," she answered.

“Christ.” I shook my head. “Did the neighbors see anything?”

“We haven’t asked them yet,” Ruth said.

My cousins were a strange bunch. “Did you report it to the police?”

“No cops,” they said in unison.

“Why not?”

“We don’t trust them,” Ruth said.

“I get that.” Sometimes I trusted the police and other times I didn’t. This whole thing seemed off, though. “What a *pinche* weird thing.”

Ruth lifted her eyebrows and I saw in her hazel eyes the flash of a certain type of curiosity that signaled intelligence. “What does ‘*pinche*’ mean?”

“Roughly translated, it’s like saying it’s a fucking weird thing.”

“True, it is a fucking weird thing. But that house was my ... I don’t know how to explain it. I love it so much.”

“I assume all your possessions inside the house were stolen as well?”

“No, it was pretty much empty, except for a couple of things my niece left there. She was using it as an office. I’d been renting an apartment until we fixed up the place.” Ruth’s eyes lit up, and her cheeks flushed. “The house was one of the original earthquake shacks. Have you heard of those?”

The hairs on my arms started doing the prickling thing they do when I get excited. “I have. I’ve seen a few in Bernal, a neighborhood near where I live, and I’ve heard there are some in the Sunset, but I’ve never been inside one. Cool. They’re not literally shacks, right? Aren’t they more like cottages?”

“True. Most of the remaining ones in the city have been added onto or remodeled badly, with no sense of design.”

“What’s the history behind earthquake shacks?” I’d always wondered about them.

She leaned forward and started speaking earnestly. “What happened was, after the 1906 earthquake, all the people who lost their homes camped out in the park. So, a few organizations, including the Parks Commission and the Army, built a bunch of small wooden cottages—more than five thousand. They were tiny, like 10 by 14 feet, some of them 14 by 18. The walls were made of redwood, the flooring was fir and the roofs were shingled in cedar. They were painted green, apparently to blend into the parks.”

“Interesting,” I said, just to keep her going.

“They were set up in refugee camps. One near the Presidio, one in the Marina and one in Dolores Park. They were essentially rent-to-own. Tenants paid \$2 a month toward the total cost of \$50. Once the cottage was paid off, the owner had the responsibility to move it from the camp to a neighborhood, wherever they could find a spot.”

Al interrupted. “The cottage, it’s like her child.” He rolled his cigar against the side of the ashtray until the head of ash broke. He shrugged, a resigned Semitic lift of the shoulders.

“Why would someone steal your cottage?” I asked her. I was thinking: Blackmail? Revenge? But I didn’t offer that up. The best way to get information is to keep silent.

The office was completely quiet. A whisper of a sound came from the back room and Al quickly dropped his cigar in the ashtray and put his hand in his pants pocket. Yikes! Was he reaching for a gun?

“It’s just my cat!” I yelled.

He moved his hand away from his pocket and picked up his cigar, cool as can be.

Ruth glared at her father. “Jesus Christ, *tateh*.”

I hadn’t heard that word for a long time. Aunt Miriam used to call her father, my grandpa, *tateh*.