

MOON TEARS

CHAPTER 1

November, 1941

I can't...breathe. I sputtered between gulps of the nearly frozen water and struggled not to drown. Each stroke in the frigid liquid felt thick and exhausting. Every boisterous breeze pricked my skin. Sometimes I wanted the asthma to win so I could sink into the icy darkness forever. Only the kicking kept me from descending to the lake's icy depths where denizens of the deep waited to nibble bits of my frozen flesh for breakfast.

"Keep going, Lou," Papa said from the rowboat beside me, stroking the water rhythmically with his oars. "You're almost there."

"*I can't,*" I coughed out, stopping to tread water and catch my breath. A rude wave shoved my head, and water plunged into my lungs. Coughs wracked my body. I jerked back as the

scales of a fish scraped across my thigh. My stomach muscles ached. But Papa wouldn't stop rowing.

Even if I had to break ice every morning on the edge of this God-forsaken lake just to get into the water, I had to swim across it. One endless mile. Three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Doctor's orders.

Blasted asthma, I thought.

I treaded water as long as I could get away with it. Every inch of my fourteen-year-old body chattered.

"The quicker you swim, the quicker you can get in the boat," Papa said.

I rolled my eyes and stuck out what must have been a purple tongue.

"Don't roll those baby blues at me, girl. Now swim."

Easy for him to say. I began performing the familiar strokes like the ingrained ritual they were. Water sluiced over my head and trickled down into my ears. My arms sliced through the crystal clear water as I imagined I was in the ocean. The warm, salty, undulating ocean. For a moment, I actually began to feel warmer. *Just a little bit farther...*

I focused on the fog drifting across the waves that promised the shoreline. The water gently rose and fell taking me with it.

A glance over my shoulder rewarded me with the first rays of morning sunlight. The fog began to dissipate as I turned back toward the shoreline. In front of me, Mount Callisto, the valley's ancient volcano, shimmered and twinkled, betraying the treasures of her slopes.

Time to start the countdown, I thought. Five, four, three, two, one...

I gave a final kick and made shore. My wrinkled hands and feet, oversized prunes, dug into the black, silky sand. The cool, dark grains squished between my toes, and I made a beeline for the drier sand, which coated my feet as I trudged up the hill ahead.

“Okay,” said Papa, pulling the boat onto shore. “Run get one.”

As my daily reward for the forced swim, Papa let me collect one diamond. From the lake, the diamonds looked like jewels of the Gods, dancers among the fire. Up close, the gems appeared murky, rough, uncut. They looked nothing like the shiny, perfectly cut stones found in fancy San Francisco stores. Most people walked right by

them, mistaking them for glass. But they looked beautiful to me, felt smooth and strong. I ran my finger along each edge, felt every groove, admired their strength and toughness.

“Good job this morning. Let’s head back.” Papa ruffled my wet head and wrapped me in an Indian blanket the tribal chief gave him last winter.

After one more glimpse at forty-two hundred feet of shimmering slopes, I snuggled into the bottom of the boat, away from the wind that rises with the sun. Papa pushed away from shore with one oar, singing a new Bing Crosby tune. It was always Bing Crosby.

“Where the turf meets the surf,” he crooned.

“Very funny, Papa.”

The croon waned to a hum. All part of the daily routine. The trek back across the lake was much quicker than the way over. The scent of the water ignited my senses instead of filling my lungs. The mist lifted off the lake like an airplane taking to the sky. Birds skirted the heavens above us and welcomed the new day. Nature arose, and life filled the valley.

A distant hum began to overtake the morning calls of mockingbirds, and I heard a break in the

rhythm of Papa's oars. I glanced up to see his steel gray eyes stare in the direction of the hum. A strange bird skimmed the mountain and descended toward the lake. Toward us.

We watched. Papa's grip on the oars tightened. His bushy brows grew closer, and his eyes shifted into the look he cast at buzzards.

A seaplane rocked and yawed overhead. Tucking the diamond safely into my fist, I shaded my eyes with my other hand to watch the plane. I ducked as the intruder buzzed our boat.

"They're coming in way too steep and banking all wrong," I said. I sat up to study the plane. "They need to put their flaps down. And soon."

I loved planes and would much rather be flying in the morning sky than swimming in morning water. I still remember the first time I saw one of those marvels in the sky. It was a little yellow tandem two-seater and the first plane I ever rode in. I felt like Amelia Earhart. I could close my eyes and feel the wind underneath the wings when that plane lifted off the ground. The local pilots took me for rides when they had extra room and taught me about ailerons, cowlings, carb heat and how to keep those big fabric-and-wood birds

up in the sky. The pilot wagging overhead could have definitely used some lessons.

The shadow of the seaplane crossed my face.

“What does that red dot mean?” I asked.

Papa gripped the oars. His stocky arms rowed faster than usual. “It means it’s time to get to shore.”