

Chapter One

Panama, The village of Ancon, near the Pacific Coast

Early May 1907

The rainy season came with a vengeance, drenching the village in mud and steam and sorrow. It was so oppressive that Mae Whittaker couldn't summon the energy to rage against or even grieve for what she knew was coming. She simply paced the cramped, mildewed interior of the tent she'd shared with her husband and six-year-old son for the past three years. Wooden boxes were packed and lined up, ready to be loaded onto the cart; locals had already scavenged the pots and other possessions she'd decided to leave behind.

The unrelenting humidity muscled its way through the canvas walls, undeterred by the clattering kerosene fan she'd propped in the corner. Using one of her remaining dry handkerchiefs, she mopped the sweat that dripped down the neck of her shirtwaist and under her arms. It was a losing battle yet paled in comparison to the war her husband was waging against his own mortality. She listened to Sinjun's ragged breath through the netting that surrounded his cot. Even though she'd repaired countless rips in the sheer fabric, an insect still buzzed, searching for a way in. *Please, God, let him sleep.*

But even that small mercy was denied. She heard a rustling from the enclosure as Sinjun feebly called out, "Maeven?"

“Yes, darling,” she said, moving quickly to turn back the flimsy web. He was shivering with a chill that only he could feel. Rail-thin in the best of times, he was now nearly cadaverous, with barely enough strength to fuel his frenzied thoughts.

He struggled to sit up. “I need to speak to you. We must make plans.”

Mae smoothed his lank hair back from his face. “We have already made them. Do you remember? The ship has arrived and is being loaded with supplies. Any time now they will let us board to return home so that you can get well.”

“But my work here ... the mission ... it’s only beginning.” He paused to marshal his forces. “We don’t have much time; you must listen to me.”

Mae swallowed a feeble burst of anguish. Sinjun was dedicated to spreading the word of God amongst the thousands of workers building the Panama Canal, but now that same God seemed to have forsaken him. It should have been safe: sanitation measures had been put into place and the swamp surrounding the Canal Zone had been drained. Yellow fever had been nearly wiped out, and malaria was on the decline. Yet it had taken but one tiny bite to render a good man useless. It was, the local shaman said, a particularly evil form of the *aire malo*.

“I am listening,” she said.

“Once I am on the other side, I will come to you.” He labored to inhale. “You will see me.”

Mae wiped her cheeks, where tears now mingled with her sweat. “Sinjun, you mustn’t talk that way. You--”

He gripped her hand fiercely. “Don’t patronize me; we both know what’s happening. My body will leave but my spirit will remain to give you solace and comfort. You won’t have to leave me. You can continue my work and I will guide you.”

Mae gently placed her other hand on his forehead. “You know that’s not what you believe, my love. You have a fever. Your true faith teaches that one day we’ll all go to heaven. That’s when we’ll see each other again.”

“No,” he groaned, pushing her hand away. “Claire believes it. I believe it. It answers all our questions. You remember what I explained to you before?”

Mae couldn’t help but remember. Several weeks earlier, she’d caught him reading a book sent by his older sister that detailed the tenets of Spiritualism. He’d shared his findings with Mae with the strange excitement of a good little boy defiantly sliding down the bannister even though he knows he shouldn’t. It puzzled her. Sinjun had always been so devout, so passionate about Scripture. Now he was turning to a theology that many people considered heresy, even the work of the Devil. It didn’t make sense, but she chose not to argue. “Yes, I remember,” she said.

“Promise me you’ll open yourself to the possibility. Let Claire guide you. She will show you that we are all immortal. It is glorious ... glorious ...” He lapsed back into a state of delirium, shivering and mumbling in his wretched version of sleep. “Promise me,” he murmured.

Staring at her husband’s ravaged face, Mae thought of the lie she’d lived since her wedding day. Maybe it was God’s will that she atone for it by doing what Sinjun asked. She could give him some peace, at least. She draped another thin blanket atop his legs. “I promise,” she whispered, not even sure if he heard her.

Liam quietly opened the flap to the tent. He was such a lovely boy, already sensitive to what was going on around him. Eager to play, but somehow knowing when it was time to be serious. This was one of those times.

“How is Papa?” he asked.

“Much better. He’s sleeping peacefully now.” Another lie.

Liam hugged Mae around her waist. “Ramon said we need to go now so we can take the train to the ship. He will bring our boxes.”

Mae knelt down so that she was at her son’s eye level; she caressed his small cheeks.

“Are you very sad to be leaving, my love?”

Her little boy set his jaw, a trick she knew he used to keep from crying. He nodded but glanced at his father lying on the shrouded cot. “I will miss Ramon and Esteban and Julio.” He looked at Mae in earnest. “Maybe we can come back one day if Papa gets well. Or ... or maybe on our own.”

“Maybe,” Mae said, hugging her son with all the love she possessed. *I will not promise you*, she thought. *The lies have got to stop sometime.*