

Excerpt

## ***The Moonseed Trilogy***

**By Judith Ingram**

### Prologue

I sometimes wonder whether Katherine's coin would have gone to someone else had our school chosen a different day for a field trip to Fort Ross.

I remember that January day being cold and drizzly. White cotton mist clung to the red cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean, where seagulls dipped and soared and disappeared into the blurred horizon. Wind howled up the cove and lashed across the bluff where we huddled over our lunches. It swept sand into our eyes and stung our lips with salt and eventually drove us into the shelter of a modest souvenir shop. A little bell jangled as we piled through the doorway into welcome warmth, announcing ourselves with adolescent giggles and the shrill self-important chatter of sixth-grade girls.

I hesitated just inside the door while my classmates streamed around me and funneled into the narrow aisles. I watched them, backpacks bobbing and heads conspiratorially close as they moved away from me. I doubt they paid any attention to the recorded music meant to create a soothing ambiance: a native flute cascading through silvery notes, a hand drum pulsing softly. Aromatherapy-scented clouds drifted and mingled with the ocean fog we brought in on our jackets.

I struck off for the furthest corner of the shop—a loner as always. I liked being alone, or at least that was my act. I knew my grandmother's wealth and notoriety set me apart from the other Academy girls, and that was fine with me. I didn't care about their silly parties or their sleepovers. I didn't need a best friend to sit with at lunch. I ignored the fact that there was something about me, something that the other girls sensed and instinctively shunned, but like I said, that was my act. I prided myself on my independence.

I reached a colorful display of Native American basketry and began an exaggerated study—aware of the whispers and guffaws behind me. I blinked hard and stuck out my chin, trying to remember how excited I was to visit Fort Ross. I loved history, and the fort—now an historic

park—was the site of the first Russian settlement on the California coast, about ninety miles north of San Francisco. I forced myself to focus on the display baskets. They were intricately woven and quite beautiful, the larger ones frilled with feathers and seashells. I reached out a fingertip, and the silky feathers bowed to my touch and sprang back, tripping my imagination.

I saw black-haired women sitting in the deep shade of redwood trees, choosing feathers to decorate their baskets while they laughed and gossiped together. Young girls were wedged between their mothers and grandmothers and aunts, watching the women's hands and learning their craft, listening to their stories—

Hairs pricked up on the nape of my neck as I suddenly felt I was being watched. I jerked my head around. My classmates were intent upon a postcard kiosk and paying no attention to me. Shivering, I pulled my jacket closer and moved along the aisle, trailing a hand over glossy covers of coffee table books about Russian and California histories. I opened a few to old drawings of Fort Ross and the coastline cliffs just after the Russians had settled the area. One picture in particular caught my attention: a child playing with her doll on a rough covered porch. I imagined her mother just inside the open door, arms dusty with flour up to her elbows as she punched down bread dough and called to the girl to stay on the porch and to keep her dress clean, for heaven's sake—

This time my entire body jerked around. My gaze flew to a colorful display of Native American blankets draping the back wall of the shop. A life-size wooden statue filled the corner behind an old-style brass cash register and glass display case. The statue's body was draped in blanket material like the wall behind it, its face chiseled into rough features that looked uncannily human.

Intrigued, I took a step closer and froze. Eyes like twin black currants gleamed at me. The statue came to life as the colorful drape moved and an arm lifted. A finger like a gnarled tree root pointed at me and crooked.

The native flute seemed suddenly loud as my classmates broke off their chatter to stare. With a grunt, the statue heaved herself off her stool and lumbered to the far end of the glass case. Like a sleepwalker compelled to obey, I approached her.

She slid open the case and selected a copper coin the size of a half-dollar. She laid it on the glass in front of me.

"You buy." Her voice was dry and cracked, like the weathered crevices pinching her face. "One day, it changes your future." She inched the coin forward with her tree-root finger and watched me.

The coin wasn't currency but a commemorative piece of some kind. A flag was etched into the gleaming copper and writing too strange to decipher at a glance.

I swallowed and looked up. The woman's eyes seemed to have no pupils—only inky depths that I feared could suck the thoughts right out of my brain if I kept staring. I swallowed again.

"How much?" I whispered.

She shrugged and regarded me without expression. I fumbled through my backpack for crumpled bills and piled all my money on the counter: forty-three dollars and eleven cents. I pushed the money toward her, reddening as the other girls snickered and whispered behind their hands.

The old woman nodded, and her eyes disappeared briefly into the folds of her face. She sighed and laid the coin on my open palm. "Today, tomorrow, yesterday," she said. "They are all the same."

I stared at her, but she didn't look at me. Instead, she scooped up my money and sidled over to the cash register.

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During the long bus ride back to San Francisco, my hand stole repeatedly into my pocket to rub the coin as if it were Aladdin's lamp. I refused to let the other girls hold it. By the time I got home, I had decided to keep the coin and its promise of magic a secret from my mother and my grandmother. I climbed into bed that night still clutching it and fell asleep with my thumb circling its rim, feeling automatically for a curious nick cut deep and worn smooth over time.

It was the cold, silent hour before dawn when something woke me. A descending moon poured a dazzling stream of silver through my window, making me squint as I opened my eyes. The silver pooled beside my bed, and in the center of the pool, not three feet away from me, stood a girl watching me.

She was small and slight, close to my own age, with a curtain of dark hair spilling down her back. Her eyes were intent on me, gleaming black in the moonlight. I stared back at her in mute astonishment, more fascinated than afraid.

I tried to sit up but found my arms and legs manacled by the paralysis that comes with sleep. As I struggled to free myself, the girl's image quivered and began to separate, like ripples in a reflecting pool. In another instant, she had dissolved. I was staring at my bedroom wall through an empty shower of moonbeams.