



MOON MOUNTAIN

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Moon Mountain

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First edition

ISBN: 979-8-218-15665-7

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

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Prologue

Moon Mountain, North Carolina

October 31, 1997

Deep in the heart of the murky forest, an enormous, birdlike creature soared silently across the night sky, high above the treetops, its wings stretched wide as a brisk gale sent rushes of exhilarating air through its rigid, glossy feathers. The autumn moon was full and gleaming, illuminating the dense mist rising over the cold landscape, and the creature watched with little interest as occasional gusts swept through the trees and thick shrubbery. So far tonight, as most nights as of late, its routine sweeps had been without incident, without entertainment, and the creature found itself becoming, frankly, quite bored.

Over the lengthy and repetitive years, it had hunted every species that roamed these woods, even a few lost and unlucky hunters (though it had been thoroughly scolded for those incidents, as humans disappearing seemed to create a much bigger ordeal compared to other species and, thus, threatened exposure for the family), and there was no longer any challenge, any thrill of the chase, or any innate pleasure it soaked up from a prey's heart-seizing and paralyzing fear when it released its ear-splitting warning cry. No. It had been too long since it had felt that rush. During these mundane nights, in what most humans would call a rut, the creature mostly hunted only for sustenance and ached for something new and stimulating to enter its domain.

Though, the creature understood there was indeed a significant change

coming to the family, and that tonight would mark the beginning of a scheme its masters had planned long, long ago. And although this plan did not entail a particular role for the creature itself—apart from providing security and running interference if needed—at least it may have new humans and events to watch over. And with humans, it had learned, imperfections and mistakes were a given—especially when emotions ran high. It pitied humans in that sense, plagued by such an infernal nuisance as these unremitting *feelings*. Love, hate, sadness, anxiety, anger, happiness . . . fear. The creature understood and had experienced some of these sensations itself, but not at such unrestrained and heightened levels as it had witnessed in humans, to where they were all-consuming at times and often behind every decision made, no matter how trivial or imperative. It had even observed, and felt, its own masters fall victim to their more human instincts over the years. But that could not be completely avoided, the creature understood, as it was a byproduct of how its masters functioned in this world.

As the creature glided idly along an air current, its beady eyes immediately shot downward when it spotted a flicker of unnatural movement in its fine-tuned peripheral vision. What or who could this be? The creature, swift but silent, swooped down several feet, then fanned its wings out and circled slowly above the visitor, staying high enough to keep itself concealed.

The electric current that had rippled through its veins pattered away. It was only a human approaching a small, run-down cabin—*her* cabin—his tall and lean figure immediately familiar. She was expecting him. What a shame. Disappointed, the creature beat its wings furiously against the wind and flew upward, higher and higher into the boundless dark sky.

* * *

Back down below, unaware of the hulking creature inspecting him from

above, the young man stepped inside the dark, dank, and decrepit cabin, swirls of disturbed dust billowing around his person. He waved a hand to clear the air in front of him as his long legs made the few short strides to reach the rear, where the cabin's only evidence of once having been a finished and inhabited space, a moldy Aubusson area rug (its original colors now indiscernible from years of dirt and decay), which normally covered the hidden trapdoor cut seamlessly into the rotting hardwood planks, now lay folded and off to the side. A sign she was already inside and waiting. He tugged up on the door's round metal handle and shielded his eyes as blindingly bright light shot upward and flooded the interior of the cabin. He then stepped down the rungs of the metal ladder and dropped dexterously into the room below.

It was only his second time visiting her hidden chambers, and he still felt the same discomfort as if he'd entered a cold, severe hospital room. The walls, ceiling, and large-format tile flooring were all a stark and sterile white, with several buzzing fluorescent tube lights hanging down from the ceiling, guiding his way down a narrow hallway and into a pocket-size room filled with floor-to-ceiling shelving that housed plenty of mysterious-looking items and gadgets. The young man could only imagine what they were or their purposes. But, from the beginning, he'd been told he would be given only the information necessary for his part in the plan and not to ask questions regarding anything else. And he knew better than to disobey.

He paused when he reached a row of potted plants on one of the wooden shelves suspended a few feet off the floor. Something about them had caught his eye the first time he'd visited as well. He gazed at their basil-green leaves and large, multicolored flowers—which emitted a sort of shimmer into the air, barely visible—then his eyes followed upward as minuscule flecks of light reflected here and there. What exactly was the purpose of these plants? Unable to stop himself, he reached out a long, slender finger and rubbed one of the flowers with ruby-red petals,

transferring a layer of a light, dust-like residue onto his skin. He sucked in a breath as a tingling sensation prickled across his finger and flowed into his palm.

“Is that you?” came a soft but firm voice. The young man jumped slightly in surprise, not realizing she’d noticed his presence from the adjoining room, then watched, mystified, as some of the sparkling dust escaped from his fingertip and dispersed into the air above, as if gravity had no effect on it.

“Er—yes, ma’am,” he said as he approached her, wiping his hand discreetly on the thigh of his jeans. He hoped she hadn’t noticed his detour. He hadn’t exactly been told *not* to touch anything, but maybe it was assumed to be a given. He couldn’t be sure, though, with her eerily calm demeanor.

Like a chameleon, the woman all but disappeared into the room with her pure white lab coat that hung down to her knees, her pants and shoes a matching white, and her silvery hair set into a tight bun. Her back was to him as she bent over a metal desk scattered with handwritten notes and books, delicately pouring a small amount of purple-tinted liquid from a glass beaker into a tiny chrome vial.

The young man glanced briefly around the second, larger room they currently stood in, which was set up with everything he assumed you would find in an operating room, including a long metal table positioned in the center and wheeled metal carts with various instruments and electronic equipment. And the cold—the whole vibe of the place sent a chill up his spine. What did she do down here? He should feel safe with her, he reasoned, with nothing to fear, but he didn’t like being there. No, he didn’t like it at all. The sooner he got what he came for and left, the better.

“Wonderful. I have it ready for you.” She turned to the young man with a bright expression on her petite, delicately aged face. She looked good, he thought to himself, considering.

Having her full attention on him wasn't something he'd encountered often, and especially since attention in general made him feel awkward, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other and responded only with a stiff nod.

With an uncanny ability to perceive the hidden emotions of those around her, she detected his hesitation and cocked her head to the side. "Do you remember what to do?"

"Y-yes."

A condescending smile played across her lips, and the young man felt heat flood his cheeks. "Are you sure you're ready for this? We can always have—"

"I can do this," he blurted.

The woman's lips set into a harsh line.

The young man cleared his throat. "Sorry. I mean, I'm ready. I won't let you down."

The woman gently grabbed his wrist and motioned for him to open his hand, then placed the miniature vial, along with a thick metallic ring, into his palm. "I know you won't. But let's review . . . just one more time."