



# ISLE OF STARS

The Second Book of MOON MOUNTAIN

Jess Porto

JESS PORTO

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*The Second Book of Moon Mountain*

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“Even in the darkest of nights, morning still  
comes.”

Vera Gallagher, Moon Mountain

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# Prologue

Charleston, South Carolina

June 1, 1998

It was just after six in the evening when Detective Grayson Blair returned to his modest cubicle at the Charleston PD, which sat among a veritable sea of identical cubicles laid out haphazardly—a prudent effort to maximize space for a growing department, most of whose tenants had already departed for the day. He shrugged off his jacket, tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn, then pulled out his swivel desk chair and dropped heavily onto the worn-out leather seat cushion. While loosening his tie, he stared down at the stack of papers before him, sighed, then slowly rubbed his tired, bloodshot eyes.

“Burning the midnight oil again, eh?”

Detective Blair looked up to find Detective Neehan—a tall and lanky man with dark eyes, bristly hair, and a thick mustache—had appeared at the edge of his cubicle, his long, tanned arms dangling over the laminated partition that separated their adjacent desks. He immediately noticed the ever-present toothpick Neehan had been chewing on nonstop since quitting smoking a month ago. “Well, where else could I possibly wish to be other than this dreamscape.”

Both men took a moment to gaze around Blair’s six-by-six cubicle with its drab gray walls, coffee-stained mustard-yellow carpeting, and basic metal desk adorned with an Apple iMac, a large stack of papers, and a slew of perfectly aligned office supplies, including a corded phone,

legal-size lined yellow pad, and five black Paper Mate pens arranged parallel and spaced evenly apart.

“You know,” Neehan started, then paused to pull the toothpick from his mouth. “Before you transferred here, I’d never known someone who actually *wanted* to spend most of their life working. Grabbing just about every case they could get their hands on, even the excruciatingly routine ones no one else wanted to touch. I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but I know one thing for sure.”

“And what would that be?”

Neehan smiled. “That if anything ever happened to me, you’re the only son of a bitch I’d want working my case.”

“I’d gladly work your murder, Neehan,” Blair said brightly. “With a smile, even.”

Neehan returned the toothpick to his mouth and said, “That hits deep.” He pulled his hand into a fist and pounded it into his chest. “Right here, man.”

Blair smirked and scooted his chair closer to the desk. “As much as I’d love to continue our daily lovemaking, I just got back from another armed robbery over by Skyline Park and need to fill out this report form. I’ll be up half the night trying to catch up with paperwork from my other cases.”

Neehan shook his head. “I don’t know who you’re kidding, Blair. We both know you’re not sad about those prospects.”

“I don’t know,” Blair said as he leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his grown-out, tousled brown hair. “Maybe I’m getting close to hitting that wall you keep mentioning. I feel like I need . . . a break. Or something.”

“Pardon?” Neehan said in a dumbfounded tone. The toothpick dangled from his bottom lip briefly before dropping onto the carpet. “I must have the wrong cubicle. Who are you, and what the hell have you done with Grayson Blair?”



Blair inhaled a deep breath. “I don’t—”

“Hey, Blair,” came a grumbling voice from somewhere near the detectives. Both turned to look through the cubicle’s opening as the chief of police for the Charleston PD, Frederick Mullan, poked his head out of the open door to his office and used his thumb to signal him over. “My office.”

The two detectives gave each other knowing glances.

Blair stood, made a meek attempt to straighten his tie, and wound his way through the sea of desks and partitions into the glass-walled office. “Sir?”

Chief Mullan, who sported a highly decorated police uniform, stood beside his ornate mahogany desk in his spacious office as he flipped through a hefty police report. He was a stout but tall man in his fifties and always wore his graying hair in a military-style high and tight. He glanced at the detective with furrowed brows. “When’s the last time you showered?”

“This morning,” Blair said in a slow and bemused tone. He lowered his chin, pulled his collar up to his nose, and sniffed. He could detect only the faint notes of the sandalwood-scented goat milk soap he always washed with.

“Oh.” There was an awkward pause, and then the chief cleared his throat. “Well, it’s not a smell I’m talking about—it’s those five-inch bags under your glassy eyes and that messy mop you presumably call hair. You look a far cry from the impeccably maintained young man who stepped into this building last fall. You need to work on getting more sleep, Detective. You look like shit. I’m beginning to worry you’ve been taking your work home. Maybe you do need a break.”

Blair thought back to the past few weeks and the countless hours he had lain in bed wide awake and knew that the chief was partly right—this wasn’t him. He also knew that if he tried to explain what was really behind his current state, the chief would probably require him to see a

shrink or, worse, release him from duty. “Yeah . . . I’ll work on that. I just need to catch up on sleep. I’m good.”

“I hope so, Detective. I don’t want to resort to forcing you on a vacation. We need you; you’re a skilled detective”—he raised an eyebrow—“but don’t go letting all that get to your head.”

The last part of the chief’s sentence sparked something inside him, almost like *déjà vu*, but Blair shook the feeling off and nodded in response.

“Now, to the real reason I called you in here,” Chief Mullan said as he closed and tossed the folder onto his desk. He turned to the detective with an amused expression. “Are you expecting any visitors from out of town?”

“Visitors? Not that I’m aware of. Why?”

“A young woman stopped by earlier and asked for you. Said she knew you.”

Blair stared at the chief, perplexed. “To see *me*? Did she give a name?”

“I didn’t catch her name. Mrs. Waltz was the one who spoke with her at the front desk. She came in a few hours ago, and when she was told you were gone and we’d have you call her, she insisted she’d wait here for you. Said she traveled a fairly long distance to see you. Mrs. Waltz put her in room three. She’s still there, waiting. Thought we might have to kick her out soon unless you decided to show up.”

“Traveled a long distance?” Blair muttered, mostly to himself. “Did you happen to catch where she came from?”

“Mrs. Waltz said something about North Carolina, I think. Some town near Asheville.”

Blair’s eyes widened with inexplicable and sudden anticipation—as if he were waiting for a visit from whoever this person was. Except he wasn’t. He had moved from Asheville over six months ago and couldn’t think of who would have traveled so far to see him unannounced. His parents were semiretired and currently living in Hilo, Hawaii, and

aside from social acquaintances, the only friends he had left behind in Asheville were a couple of coworkers he would go fishing with and occasionally have a few beers and shoot pool with at the local bars after work.

The chief crossed his arms and stared pointedly at him as if waiting for an explanation as to who the visitor could be, but the detective was oblivious to everything except his inner thoughts. Although he couldn't pinpoint where the oddly familiar sensation had come from, his heartbeat quickened with every passing second.

“Perhaps an ex-girlfriend, Detective? Mrs. Waltz mentioned she was quite attractive and seemed anxious to speak with you.”

Blair gave a snorty laugh, not wishing to admit that he'd not had any romantic entanglements during his time at the Buncombe County Sheriff's Office, as he'd been preoccupied with diligently building what should have been a rewarding and prolific career. “You said she's in room three?”

Chief Mullan's arms remained crossed, but his lips twitched into a slight smirk. “Mm-hmm.”

\* \* \*

Detective Blair knocked lightly on the door to the interview room and let himself in directly. He took barely a step inside and stopped short, looking closely at the young woman sitting in the metal chair behind the small, square table that filled most of the tiny room. She wore a sleeveless black romper, had thick, curly auburn hair that hung slightly below her shoulders, and looked as though she stood no taller than five feet. However, what had caught his attention first were the dark circles beneath her round dark-brown eyes, as if she hadn't slept in a week. A feeling the detective knew all too well. Enclosed in her hands was an empty Styrofoam cup stained with dark remnants of coffee, and her

fingernails stuck out, as they had been painted in a neon-purple polish that had already begun to crack and chip.

She was attractive, the detective thought, but an empty feeling radiated through his chest, and the unexplained anticipation he had felt only moments ago deflated into a puddle of nothingness. He reminded himself that he wasn't expecting anyone, so why did he feel let down?

They both stared wide-eyed at each other momentarily. Her expression carried a clear undertone that she recognized him, while his carried one that indicated he had absolutely no idea who she was.

"Hello," Blair finally said. "I was told you've been waiting for me, but I don't believe we've met before. Are you looking for another detective who works here? Detective Myers and I are roughly the same age and started around the same time, maybe—"

"No," blurted the young woman, cutting him off. "There's no mistake. It's you I came to see. Detective Grayson Blair."

He only stared at her in mounting puzzlement.

"You . . . you really don't recognize me? At all?"

"I'm sorry. Should I?"

The young woman looked down, her eyes darting back and forth furiously as if some new and vital piece of information had come to light, and she was trying to digest it.

When seconds passed, and she didn't speak again, Blair stepped closer to the table and said, "You're from North Carolina? What's your name?"

She looked back up at the detective, and the tension now brimming in her eyes caught him unawares. "Yes, I'm from North Carolina, but I need to ask you two questions before I tell you who I am and why I came here."

Quite presumptuous, Blair thought, for a stranger to come to him and demand answers before providing hardly any herself. But his instincts told him that something was happening here, something he didn't yet understand, and he decided to trust those instincts and play it cool until

he learned more. “Okay.”

“Why’d you move here from Asheville?”

A random question, it seemed, but it also revealed that she did know the detective or about him, to some degree. Blair narrowed his eyes and thought back to last fall. “I-I needed a change.”

“That’s it?”

“Er . . . well, I didn’t feel my career was heading anywhere in Asheville. Then I got the offer to transfer to Charleston, a larger and growing city with more opportunities for advancement, and I took it. And, yes, that’s it—that’s my riveting tale.” What had she expected? Blair then felt another odd sensation come over him as if his reasoning suddenly didn’t make sense—like it was unnatural . . . a lie. But he knew it was the truth. What other reason would he have had to leave North Carolina? “What’s the second question?”

“Do you remember a girl about my age with long dark hair . . . named Morgan Thomas?”

Blair began to shake his head, then stopped as a brief image of immense and radiating emerald-green eyes seared across his vision—eyes that had been haunting his dreams for weeks—and a physical weakness so sharp and sudden overcame him that he nearly dropped to his knees. The feeling was fast and furious and barely visible from the outside, but before he recovered, another searing emotion ripped through him, tearing apart seams he hadn’t been aware of that must have been rooted deeply inside him. He fought to control his composure, as all he felt now was a burning anger, and he didn’t know why.

“You really don’t, do you?” whispered the young woman, who had witnessed nothing more than a confused man standing in front of her, unmoving. “My God . . . she was right.” A sheen of tears lined her eyes, and she looked away from him.

Blair took a deep breath to steady himself, closed the door to the interview room, then pulled out the chair opposite her and slid onto

the seat. “Tell me: Who are you, and why have you come here?”

The young woman wiped her eyes and straightened in her chair. She stared back, unblinking, and said, “My name is Sheridan. Sheridan Milbane. And I need—Morgan and I, we need your help . . . and we’re running out of time.”