



MIDNIGHT MOON

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For Jenny
blood made us sisters,
love made us friends



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MOON



CHAPTER ONE

Darkness wrapped its long arms around Amanda Hopewell Rhodes, pulling her into its silence. She welcomed the sound of the wipers sweeping the pelting rain from the windshield, hoping it would calm the uneasy feeling in her stomach. *It has to be the rain and darkness*, she thought. Rain and darkness was an unnerving duo. It reminded her too much of the day Andy had been buried.

Three years and the patter of rain on her umbrella, the dark mist creeping over the cemetery, and the awful lassitude invading her body and soul still haunted her. She had stood as chilled inside as without, but no one suspected the tears of grief on her face were only raindrops swept there by the mournful wind.

Andy and Amanda, Hopewell's prototype for lovers, wandered into the ideal marriage, and ten months later produced the model family, twins. Amanda had existed in the town's illusion of her life, accepting it as truth. The fallacy ended when Andy died in a car crash. One minute he was there on the phone telling Amanda he wanted dinner served early, and a few minutes later another call came and she knew he would never come home for dinner again. Amanda remembered calmly removing his place setting and sitting down to a plate of perfectly cooked pot roast. Pot roast, always served on Wednesdays was traditional. She excelled in the programmed course of tradition 101 with flying colors. She was a Hopewell and a Hopewell always did as expected.

In the weeks after the funeral, as spring transformed the somberness of winter into luminous warmth, Andy's shadow over her life had also

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begun to disperse. Amanda had followed the pattern drawn by her society, never questioning if it was what she had wanted, but now for the first time in her life she could decide in which direction her first step alone would be. This new job would be in an environment completely opposite from Hopewell. The warnings came daily that her choices would alienate family and friends, and Hopewell Society, but she made the choice. She was now the imperfect Amanda Hopewell Rhodes, but completely exuberant in her freedom to enjoy the revelation.

The wipers mocked her with foolish – foolish as they strained to clear the heavy rain from the windshield. Although the words echoed in her thoughts, she laughed aloud and determined in her heart to prove them wrong.

The pelting rain slowed to a drizzle but the roads, twisting like a well-trained contortionist, were anything but improved. Her arms ached, and she was sleepy. Amanda fought the drowsiness, inching her way through the directions so carefully she would have tried the patience of a snail. She was hours late, but finally spotted the rectangular log cabin which was her destination. In the moon light the cabin loomed out of the side of the mountain as if an earlier deluge had washed it from the top, and in its descent had managed to grasp hold of the trees and boulders surrounding it. It sat proud, clinging to its spot as naturally as the neighboring forest.

Amanda steered the old Ford truck she proudly purchased with the proceeds from the sale of her jewelry into the cul-de-sac and sat quietly between her past and her future under the diamond-spangled cover of a dark velvet sky. One turn of the wheel, and she could return to a safe and secure life. Likewise, one step would begin a new uncertain one. Gathering her suitcase, jacket, and purse, she stepped from the vehicle. Tiny white puffs of vapor escaped the warm confines of her mouth as she breathlessly trudged up the split logs placed into the slope for steps. A strange stillness screamed in Amanda's ears. Before now, she had never known it had a sound. She laughed. Its ring split the silence and wrapped her in its warmth.

Through the windows on the cabin's front side a soft light flickered in welcome as Amanda stepped onto the porch running the length of her small residence. Neatly stacked firewood filled one end; an old swing the other. The valley, cradled by the towering mountains, lay stretched below her feet. Its lights twinkling like stars reflected in a mirror smooth lake. The door, accompanied by the squeak of rusty hinges, opened easily at her touch. She cautiously entered the cozy warm room. A massive stone fireplace dominated the small living quarters. Flames crackled lazily in the hearth, casting eerie shadows up the pungent, pine-scented logs.

Amanda ran her hand along the wall, searching for a switch to brighten her surroundings, but her efforts were in vain. Several oil lamps, their glass globes sparkling with the fire's glow, enforced her growing suspicion that progress had not crept up this particular mountain.

The fire's light would have to do for tonight, she decided after examining one of the lamps. There was no need to blow herself up on her first night here. Scanning the room, she saw minimal furniture scattered haphazardly about as if it had never felt the touch of a woman. A brown sofa, sagged and faintly smelling of mildew, faced the fireplace. The door on the front, one in the back, and a pair of windows were the only openings into or out of the cabin. A handmade table pushed against the sill of one window, and two spindly chairs sat on either side of the other. Minus curtains, the windows glared like two dark eyes at the intruder. A mammoth bed, looking trapped in its restrictive space, loomed in the shadows of the other end of the room. She was delighted to find the stacked mattresses were feather stuffed and the coverlet was a handmade quilt. She could see the long hours of labor worked into the delicately stitched multi-colored stars of various materials. A cool rectangle of light lay across the quilt, cast there by the moon's rays filtering through the skylight above the bed.

A counter fit snugly against the wall by the back door. The sink minus faucets, filled the top. Amanda pumped the handle of the rusty pump protruding out over the sink coaxing a stream of ice water from its lip to fill one of the aluminum pots she found on the sparsely filled shelves

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under the sink. A few staples of flour, sugar, canned goods, and coffee shared the nook with the kitchen utensils.

Tired and sleepy, her thoughts filled with the aroma of a first cup of coffee prepared in her new home, Amanda placed the pot on top of the iron grate by the fire and curled her exhausted body onto the sofa. Reaching under the pillow to flip it to the cool side, her fingers touched a scrap of paper. As she turned the paper to catch the firelight the remains of a picture came into focus: The smiling face of a dark haired young Indian boy and beside him a beautiful blonde girl, her eyes and mouth mutilated with dark, empty holes punched through the faded paper.

Shaking the uneasy feeling the picture gave her and with the silence still ringing in her ears, Amanda removed her uncomfortable new boots, climbed into bed and gathered the covers tightly around her body.

The next morning Amanda stirred from deep slumber as spears of heat danced through the skylight. Stretching lazily, she pushed the heavy cover back and sat up. The room's cold breath reminded her that the climate here in the mountains, although only a few hundred miles from the balmy seaside town of Hopewell, was much colder. On drive up the mountain she had noticed the leaves of the hardwoods had long reached their peak of color, and the once brilliant show-offs were now reduced to a mass of brown carpet protecting the earth from the nippy frost blanketing it each night.

Amanda's eyes swept the room and came to rest on the soot covered mass of metal that was to be her cup of coffee the night before. The remainder of the pot lay among the cold, lifeless ashes that had danced with vigor a few hours earlier. Swinging her legs over the side of the bed her feet touched something other than the cold floor. The furry creature scampered under the bed almost as fast as she dived back on it, jerking the covers around her head.

Accompanying her screams of horror was the sound of the door bursting open, bringing with its icy breath a tall bundle of sheepskin coat. A bearded face wearing a concerned look peered from underneath the hood.