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MOON LOVE VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

Megan Lynn

There is a valley north of San Francisco where the moon shines her love. Mountains stand tall and proud, rooted to the ground, protecting the valley floor. The North and East mountains are darker, the protectors. They are covered with tall, earthy green trees that, on grey mornings, fog tangles in on its way over the mountain crest, clearing just before noon. The North and East mountains keep the valley's secrets, watch over it as it changes. They make and accept the shadows, the voids, what is unseen but known. Opposite are the South and West mountains. They are green, open and clear. They separate the valley from the sea, keep the fog at bay, at the bay. The South and West mountains are sugar-fresh, coated in verdant grasses that wave to the sun; they are an exploration, an adventure, friends to laugh with in the afternoon heat and sing to as clear evening falls. The North and East mountains are dusk, dangerous and unknown; the South and West mountains dawn, fresh and hopeful. The four stand together, tall and solid on tightly packed earth, knowing their purpose: to watch over Moon Love Valley.

Summer brings laughter to the valley, the plants and animals rejoicing in the sun. The adobe soil bakes under the sun's warm touch, rich with the stuff of life. On sunny days, the valley is washed in a light so golden, everything glows, inside out. The roots that bury themselves deep in the dirt thrive, drinking moisture the soil has stored since Winter's heavy rains. Grapes hang, full almost to bursting off the thread-like vines, their sweetness perfuming the valley air. The grasses on the mountains fade a bit, the green softening as if in the wash as Summer drugs the valley.

Fall brings harvest and hard work, plucking the ripe grapes, sagging with their sugar that will be artfully turned to tart alcohol in full bodied merlots and cool pinot noirs. The trees release brown and red leaves in a downpour as pumpkin patches flame orange, anticipating small hands' claim. A chill settles into the valley's bones as clouds return, covering the blue sky.

Winter's cold is fought with smoky fireplaces. Rain washes the valley, drenching the soil that will be tilled and planted soon. Night falls early, the valley sleeping before six at the darkest. Winter moves slowly through the valley, lazing between the mountains, blanketing the hills until spring finally pushes it out.

The valley comes alive under Spring's soft touch, the whisper on the wind that makes the daisies, daffodils and, of course, poppies burst in the long-lost rays. The grasses turn a bright green, deep with the rain stored from winter. Strong winds shake the valley, winds that move from the south and push against the soft bay breezes blowing over the mountains that stand in the west. The two meet in the basin and dance, a breath before summer's oppressive heat, and push winter's few clouds across the blue sky, a banner announcing Spring. Spring in the valley is a time of birth, of hope and redemption. It is when the mountains rest calmly, watching, waiting as the valley returns to its glory.

The clouds played with the crescent moon, pushing and pulling their opaque film across the moon's clear white surface. She sat perched on the driver's seat, her headlights barely cutting ten feet in front of the grill. The night lay thick, but as she had wound down the mountain on the highway, the valley had sparkled with light. It had waited up for her.

Now, though, out here at the foot of the East mountains, the land was dark, sleeping, the hills tucked under the trees dreaming of green fields, the light of the welcoming town now south of her. This was the middle of the two big towns the valley relied on; out here lived farmers and ranchers, people who still rose with the dawn and retired with the sunset. The chickens, cows, sheep, goats and horses were tucked in dark barns. Summer was still a month or so away and the nights were cool. She remembered that much.

Balding tires crunched on the gravel driveway. The bushes on either side were growing in, daring to completely block the way. She really didn't care; they could barricade her in for all it mattered to her. Maybe they wouldn't find her. She took her foot off the gas pedal and let the old sedan coast the driveway. She remembered lazy summer days spent running up and down, leaping into the then-manicured bushes in frenzied, passionate water balloon wars, followed by backyard barbecues and s'mores over the fire pit. But in all the years she'd been away, she could never picture the house. It was a dark hole in her mind, an image repressed from sadness and anger.

Finally, the car curved around the last bend and it came into view. Weak moonlight flowed down from the sky, bathing the single-story house in soft white light. It was simple, a structure erected for safety and comfort, square with a pitched roof, a big door in the middle, porch wrapping around the front. She parked, grabbed her bag and closed the door, too tired from driving and thinking to get her suitcase in the back. She walked over the gravel, the stones pushing against the worn soles of her ratty sneakers. Each of the three porch steps creaked under her weight, something they hadn't done in over four years. The flowered easy chair sat in the right corner, rotten and forgotten.

Panic seized her as she fumbled with her keys, worried that her key may not work. But the door turned with just a slight shove of her hip. The first thing she did was sneeze. And sneeze again. Dust swirled around her, the slight night breeze pushing in from the open door, mixing with stale air that hadn't been stirred since that day. The chill settled deep in her bones and sent a shiver racing down her spine. She shut the door and flicked the light switch, exhaling when the light above her head flickered on, dim but on. She'd figured they hadn't shut off the electricity—that would require work, effort. She slipped her feet out of the sneakers, for shoes were never allowed in Grandma's house. Her toes stretched and flexed, musty from hours crammed sock-less in the shoes that were ripe with a tang of years of sweat, dirt and her own scent. The hardwood was cool on her soles and the pads of her toes; she could feel the grooves and nicks worn in from years of being walked on, a family's history carved in hieroglyphs no one could read.

She snorted. "Fitting," she mumbled to the house. As she moved into the living room, she thought of the last time they all had been here. The house was shrouded in a black cloud. She moved in a fog, a blanket of grief. For three days Grandma lay in the living room, arms peacefully, eternally resting on her chest. She fought every urge to run over and pry them down—Grandma had always been in motion, walking, cleaning,

cooking, laughing, scolding, even sitting in the flowered chair on the porch, she had to rock back and forth. Always in movement, Grandma had never just sat there with her hands primly on her lap.

“I’m no lady,” she’d say, her dark grey curls thinning through the years, but always twisted in a bun and held with a pin, blue eyes shining. “Ladies have too much time on their hands; wasting it if you ask me. If I were a lady, nothing would get done around here. Ladies don’t have dirt or blood on their hands.” Grandma’s hands were cracked and rough from the work around the house and barn, more so after Grandpa had died. She wouldn’t accept any help from either son (not that they were eager to offer it; both had busy, important jobs in business) nor would she move to a smaller place. “I’m gonna die in the garden and people can come and have the viewing right there in the living room. Then you’ll all bury me in the backyard.” She realized now it was easier to hear about death when it was in the future, undetermined and not carved on a headstone beneath Grandma’s name.

They had complied with Grandma’s wishes, or else she would have come back and haunted them. She walked around, a small, childish part of her waiting for Grandma to wake up, move out of the coffin and yell at them all for just standing around when there was work to do. But she remained still, silent in death as she never had been in life.

The counters were covered in a sea of Saran wrap, glistening in the feeble sunlight. Most of the food had spoiled as there was no more room in the fridge and no one was doing more than pushing food around on flimsy paper plates. The thought of swallowing bits of food and the slimy mucus that coated the back of her throat, the product of many tears shed, made her gag. The house was weighed down with bouquets of chrysanthemums, Grandma’s favorite flower, though no one seemed to care that she had hated cut flowers.

“Beauty destroyed,” she’d say with a sad shake of her head, curls loosening for just a moment before falling back in place. “If I want to see flowers, I’ll just look outside.”

Now, she walked across the tiny room and into the dining room. The table and six chairs stood at attention as if waiting for everyone to finish their chores so they could come in and relax over a bowl of Grandma’s stew and biscuits. A flash of light caught the corner of her eye and she spun around. Resting in the moonlight was a shard of glass. For a split second she furrowed her brow, but then the memory flooded her brain.

Her father stood in the living room, directly in front of the casket, murmuring with mourners fond memories of his mom. “Swear to God, she snatched the chicken right out of his hands and told him to ‘Cluck off,’” he was saying. She almost smiled—that was a good story and her dad was most charming when in front of a crowd. But her lips just wouldn’t curve up.

“What’s wrong honey?” her mom asked as she handed her a plate full of food, identical to the one she’d thrown out not twenty minutes ago.

“Nothing.” She took the plate and set it on the table before gulping her wine. No one cared that she was only eighteen; this was wine country, after all.

Her mother frowned but didn’t say anything about her indelicate behavior. “Why don’t you go outside and talk with Uncle Drew and Simon?” She made a face at her cousin’s name. She couldn’t stand Simon, who was so perfect (in his own eyes)

because he was becoming a doctor. It was the only respectable profession, he'd told her once after a long lecture on why English majors can only teach, and who can get rich teaching? She'd wanted to slap him, but she'd refrained.

"Simon's just Simon," Grandma had said a few hours later after she'd told her. "He's..."

"An asshat?" she'd supplied.

Grandma had winked. "You said it, not me."

"I think I'll just lie down," she told her mom. Unfortunately, that gulp was a bit larger than she had meant and she misjudged, knocking into the side table. The vase, top-heavy from mum buds, wobbled for an extended, movie-esque three seconds before crashing to the floor. Water spread quickly, soaking the floor and their feet. Her mother threw up her hands and turned in a huff to get a towel. She'd officially ruined the funeral. Everyone in the living room stared, judgmental looks plastered on their faces.

She shrugged and, in what was a bad move looking back but seemed fine at the time, took another slug of wine. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and tipped the glass in their direction. "It's been real."

Her father moved towards her, his face clouded in anger. "What do you think you are doing?" he asked in a harsh whisper, taking her elbow and leading her through the kitchen into the tiny mudroom in back.

She jerked her arm back. "What are you doing? Grandma's dead and you're holding court, acting like it's a fucking party!"

"Lower your voice," he said sharply and in that instant, she hated her father more than she ever had. Sure they'd never gotten along. No one had ever mistaken her for a Daddy's girl; at best, they tolerated each other. They'd never had a big falling out; that would imply a close relationship at some point. No, it was more like they had never bonded in the first place.

"Grandma is dead," she said again, low and slow, "and you're standing in front of her coffin telling your best stories, acting like her body behind you doesn't matter."

"Hey!" Wow, who was the one with the raised voice now? "Show some respect. She was my mother and I am your father."

She rolled her eyes. "Rich, Daddy. You've never been a father one second of my life."

"I'm the one who bought you food and clothes and put a roof over your head. I'm the one putting you through school."

She scoffed, almost amazed at just how much he didn't understand. "Yeah, because who needs love?"

"You were always over here!"

"Because Grandma wanted me!" Tears flowed down her cheeks which she angrily slashed at. The hatred in his eyes nauseated her, but she wouldn't back down. Not this time. "She wanted me over here, wanted to spend time with me, wanted to be with me. You never did, not when there was another deal to close."

"Those deals gave you everything you were accustomed to, everything you're spitting at like a little brat."

They were both shouting and her mother poked her head in. "Why don't you two do this somewhere else? You're making the guests uncomfortable." And heaven forbid her mother's guests were uncomfortable.

She threw her hand up and pushed past her mother. "I'm out of here," she said, grabbing her purse off the counter and stomping past the stunned guests.

She hadn't been back until now. She had holed up in her dorm room during the school years, focusing on homework instead of the empty weight in her soul, and had rented rooms or sublet tiny apartments during the summers, but now...she was three weeks away from graduation and had no plans. She hadn't applied to any master's programs and she couldn't do any more than substitute teach with her bachelor's. Maybe she should have become a doctor after all.

She snorted and wondered what Grandma would have said.

Probably she would have patted her hand and said, as she had many times before, "We all have our won paths to travel. Have a little faith my dear." Her eyes always sparkled when she said that. It was their inside joke.

She smiled and moved into the back of the house where the two bedrooms were. Grandma's was untouched; bottles, jars and pots on the dresser top, clothes neatly hung in the closet and the old quilt folded at the end of the bed. It had been a rosy color once, like the morning sky as the sun lit it up, rising behind them over the Eastern mountains, but had faded with warm washings and cold nights to a soft, pale rose. She pulled it off the bed and put it to her nose. It still smelled like Grandma.

Wrapping herself in it, she walked to the door that led to a small cement patio and the backyard and stepped back into the night. The moon was still perched high in the sky, the clouds gone, allowing the tiny slice to bathe the house and hills in a soft, strong light.

"The moon's love is its light," Grandma had said one night as they sat together, hands clutching hot cocoa.

"Why Grandma?" she had asked.

Grandma smiled and hugged her closer. "Because it doesn't have to shine—that's the sun's job. But the moon, well she shines out of love. Many years ago the people who lived here before us named the valley in their language after the moon."

"Why Grandma?" she'd asked again.

"Because sweetheart they understood the moon. Giving light to the mountains and the valley is what the sun does. That's how we grow our food and the hay for the horses and how the flowers bloom. The sun washes the valley in golden light so that the grasses turn green and the grapes ripen. But the moon, well, we don't depend on her like the sun. We sleep while the moon is out. She shines because she loves us. Her light is our way of knowing we are safe nestled against these mountains. We are the children of the valley of the moon and we honor her by living each day in the sunlight, caring for ourselves and others."

She had always known Grandma was a part of the valley. She had lived on the valley floor her entire life, died with her hands buried in its dirt. Grandma breathed the valley; it seeped into her bones and sweated out of her pores. She had known, but hadn't understood. She'd lived these past four years in a place of hills, someone always looking down on her, and unable to see past the next block. She had hated it.

She looked across the backyard, scrubby with overgrowth. Though she knew it was ridiculous, for it was simply too dark, she could have sworn she could see Grandma's headstone in the corner of the lot. Grandma's words came to her on the wind. "You are a daughter of the moon. You are a child of the valley. These winds blow like the blood

running in your veins. The grass blades are imprinted on your soles. The sun has freckled your skin. You are marked, daughter of the moon. Dance, dance under her. Tilt your chin back so that your moon mother may gaze down upon it, see your smile, know she has nurtured another.”

Grandma’s voice filled her ears. She could feel her presence in the dirt, grasses, trees and hills. Grandma was still alive in the valley. Her ears were buzzing with the words, words Grandma had never spoken, but yet they were her words. “Child of the valley, run. Run around the floor, let the tall grasses reach up and tickle the insides of your thighs. And don’t forget to bow to the mountains. This is your true home. The valley is your floor, the mountains are your walls. Your heart is safe here, Granddaughter. I can feel it smiling. Embrace your valley. Do not shun it. You are loved by the moon wherever you go. You just have to remember to look up. Daughter of the moon, breathe. You are home.”

Now, barefoot, she stepped off the cold cement patio and walked, the weeds and pebbles cutting into the bare soles of her feet. A slight breeze blew from the West, ruffling her blonde curls. It was warm, unseasonably so, and brought with it the sweet, intoxicating smell of summer. She smiled and closed her eyes, walking blind for a moment while the breeze blew around her, pushing her in the right direction.

She opened her eyes and stood before the marble grave marker. She knew Grandma would have hated it, would have wanted something simple, or nothing at all. But she had fled before her parents had ordered it. She decided she would tear it down and put a cross in its place.

She knelt in the tall grasses, the blades gliding against her skin. She reached out and touched Grandma’s name etched into the cool stone.

Tears she hadn’t known had gathered in her eyes spilled down her cheeks and fell into her lap. As her fingertips followed the letters, she whispered to them both, “Have a little faith, Faith.”

The wind blew again. In that moment, the mountains and the valley welcomed her home.