



# THE MOONLIGHT CHILD



BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *HELLO LOVE*

**KAREN McQUESTION**

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## DESCRIPTION

On a cold January night, Sharon Lemke heads outside to see a lunar eclipse when she notices something odd at the house across from her backyard. Through her neighbor's kitchen window, she sees what appears to be a little girl washing dishes late at night. But the Fleming family doesn't have a little girl, and even if they did, why would she be doing housework at that late hour? It would be so easy for Sharon to just let this go, but when eighteen-year-old Niki, a former foster child, comes to live with Sharon, she notices suspicious activity at the Flemings' house as well. When calling social services doesn't result in swift action, the two decide to investigate on their own.

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*For Jessica Fogleman, editor extraordinaire*

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## CHAPTER ONE

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Today was Morgan's birthday. Three years had passed, but in Wendy's mind, her daughter was still eighteen, the age she'd been when she'd had an argument with her mother and stormed out of the house with a backpack full of her belongings. Her parting words to her mother had been, "I am so done with you. You can just go to hell!"

Edwin had predicted she'd be back, but even on that day Wendy had a bad feeling. For several months prior to that, she and Morgan had gotten into a lot of fights, mostly about her daughter's much older boyfriend, Keith, and her new set of friends, all of them druggies, as far as Wendy could tell. Morgan had been a difficult teenager, and she'd gotten worse after she'd fallen in with this new crowd, the ones she'd met working as a barback in a sleazy place downtown. An eighteen-year-old working nights at a bar was undoubtedly a recipe for trouble. The news that she'd gotten a job there hadn't gone over well with her parents. Wendy had argued that it couldn't even be legal. "You're under twenty-one," she'd pointed out. "You're not even supposed to be on the premises, much less employed there."

Morgan had shot back, "With tips, I make three times as much as working in retail. You said that if I wasn't going to college, I needed to make enough money to support myself. Then when I go and do it, all you do is find fault." Morgan had a way of turning Wendy's words against her, something that made Wendy crazy. By nature, she was a peacemaker, but Morgan was determined to be contentious.

Edwin had said to take a hands-off approach. "Let her get it out of her system. She'll get tired of it. She'll see that those people aren't going

anywhere in life. We raised her right. She'll come back to us."

"And if she doesn't get tired of it?" Wendy asked. "If she doesn't come back to us?"

"Wendy, we really don't have much choice. She's an adult. The more you push, the more she'll push back. If we're calm and keep touching base with her, she'll come to us when she's ready. Believe me, this is just a phase."

Every fiber of her being disagreed with him, but she'd deferred, thinking he was the more levelheaded, unbiased of the two of them. Besides, as a college professor, he dealt with kids Morgan's age every day. He was sort of the expert when it came to eighteen-year-olds. In her heart she felt he was wrong, but he seemed so sure that she doubted herself. She regretted it later. Mother's intuition was the one thing she had going for her, and she'd ignored it.

Drinking and drugs had become the monsters driving her daughter. She couldn't prove Morgan was using drugs, but her instincts told her it was true. Morgan's personality had changed. She was moody and had lost weight, something she'd attributed to the physicality of the work. To illustrate, she'd flexed her biceps and said, "I got this from carrying cases of beer up from the basement." Like it was a point of pride. When her new best friend, a woman named Star, came to the door looking for Morgan, all Wendy could think was that she looked like a drug addict out of a TV movie, right down to the stringy hair, bloodshot eyes, and twitchy movements. She'd come to borrow money, of course, something Wendy had picked up on even though the two young women's conversation had been whispered in the front hall.

All of this conflict and worry, and then she was just gone.

At first they thought she'd stayed over at a friend's house. After she'd been missing two days, Wendy had filed a police report. The police were sympathetic, but not too helpful. Morgan, they pointed out, wasn't technically missing. Morgan's parting words were a clear message that she was leaving of her own accord. The police were nice, though. They questioned all the sketchy people who frequented Morgan's workplace. They asked about the boyfriend, Keith, but no one knew much about him, much less where he was or how to reach him. To her utter shame, Wendy realized she didn't even know his last name. She'd asked Morgan for his

full name and had been accused of interrogating her, so she'd let it drop. Now she knew that letting it go had been a big mistake.

The police quickly hit a dead end, but Wendy gave them credit for trying.

For her own sanity, Wendy got through the first year by staying busy. In addition to her full-time job as an accountant for a law firm, she put up posters, made phone calls, and created a website. She called Morgan's cell continuously, until it no longer connected with voice mail. The phone company said the account had been canceled, but they couldn't give her any other information. She still checked the website every morning for comments, even though they never led to anything concrete. The web page had a heading that said, *Have you seen our daughter, Morgan Duran?* Below she'd posted a collage of photos of Morgan, along with her physical description. Five-foot-six, slender build. Brown eyes, dark-brown hair, medium-tan skin. There was so much more to her than that, though, so Wendy had added, *Morgan, if you're reading this, please come home. We miss you so much.*

So many memories. From early on, her daughter had a smile that could light up the world and a laugh that was infectious. Her older brother, Dylan, had adored her—still adored her.

As time passed, she and Edwin would only talk about Morgan in bed, the darkness making it easier for her to spill out her grief and worries. Although Edwin denied it, Wendy got the impression that he thought Morgan was dead. He never said as much, probably because saying the words aloud would tear them both in half, but she got the message all the same. What he'd said was, "I'm just as devastated as you are, but I think we should be prepared for the worst."

She would never be prepared for the worst, but this in-between state, the not knowing, was just as bad, eating her up from the inside out. During her busy days at the law firm, she sometimes went hours without thinking of Morgan, but she never made it through a whole day without the agony of knowing her daughter was gone.

Dylan had suggested that all three of them send in a vial of saliva to both 23andMe and Ancestry.com so that their DNA was on file. Just in case. She did it, but her "just in case" included a scenario in which Morgan was in a coma in a hospital somewhere, unable to be identified, and when the DNA was matched and they rushed to her side, the sound of her

mother's voice would bring her back to consciousness and lead to a full recovery.

After the first two years, friends and relatives had stopped asking, knowing that if there was any news, they'd be notified. Occasionally there would be an article or video segment online about a missing person, someone who turned up after having been missing for years and then subsequently reunited with their family. None of these were gentle stories. The subjects were never the victim of amnesia. None of them had been out of touch with their families due to a misunderstanding. Usually horrific things had happened to them, things Wendy wouldn't wish on her worst enemy, but for some reason, people felt the need to forward these news stories to her, as if to say, *See, it's not hopeless. It still might happen.*

Giving up wasn't an option, so she kept on searching online, checking in with the police, and reading the comments on the website. As if her efforts alone would lead to a happy ending.

Today, she stayed home from work on Morgan's birthday because someone needed to commemorate the day, to remember that there once was a girl named Morgan, who'd started off as a precious newborn, six pounds four ounces at birth, the sweetest baby she'd ever laid eyes on. Wendy recalled Morgan's childhood, how she loved to dress up as a princess, how she followed her older brother around the house like a little duckling, and how proud she was of making it all the way through middle school without taking a sick day, not even once. It was in high school when the trouble started—the defiance, the sneaking out of the house—but even then, Wendy saw signs of her beautiful, smart, funny daughter underneath it all. It was a phase, she'd told herself, a phase Wendy had prayed would pass quickly. Even with all the grief Morgan had caused, Wendy wouldn't have traded her for the world. And that was how it was until, unthinkably, the world took her away from them.

That day, after checking the website one more time, Wendy went to the pantry closet and pulled out a cellophane-wrapped two-pack of Hostess CupCakes. She'd bought them just for this occasion. They'd been Morgan's favorite. Wendy placed one cupcake in the middle of a small plate and stuck a candle in it. She got the box of kitchen matches from the junk drawer, and with shaking hands, she struck a match against the dark strip on the side of the box. It flared up nicely, and she lit the candle, then blew out the match and threw it into the kitchen sink.

Carrying the cupcake to the table, she sat down in front of it and began to sing in a quavering voice. “Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Morgan, happy birthday to you.”

Blowing out the candle, Wendy made a wish.

## CHAPTER TWO

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**B**efore that night, Sharon had never given them much thought.

Even though their backyards shared a lot line, Sharon had never met the family. From the name on the mailbox, she knew their last name was Fleming. Occasionally during drives down their street, she got glimpses of them: the woman, a willowy redhead with a short, expensive-looking haircut; the husband, a grim-faced businessman; their son, an overweight, frowning teenager; and a small yappy dog. From googling she knew that the parents' names were Suzette and Matthew. No amount of online searching brought up the son's name, which was just as well.

Sometimes she saw the teenage son walking the dog, the dog pulling at the leash, the boy wearing an oversize hoodie, his shoulders hunched as if he carried some enormous burden. Her sightings of Mr. and Mrs. Fleming were more fleeting. Sometimes she spotted Matthew doing yard work, but most of the time it was brief views of them coming or going, Suzette backing down the driveway in her silver Audi, her husband getting his briefcase out of the trunk of his black midsize Toyota after having pulled into the attached garage.

Nothing about them seemed out of the ordinary.

A tall wooden fence at the back of the house kept them out of sight from the other side. As a single retiree, she had nothing in common with any of them, but she was curious by nature. Lately, most of her social interactions were comprised of friendly waves to the neighbors, going to lunches and movies with old friends, Sunday church services, and frequent phone conversations with her daughter, Amy, who had relocated to Boston.

That particular night, she planned to see the super blood moon lunar eclipse that everyone had been talking about. Even the cashier at the grocery store had mentioned it, saying it was going to be a clear night, perfect for viewing.

At eleven o'clock, Sharon pulled on her boots, gloves, and down coat, ready to go outside to get a better view. It seemed a little foolish to get all bundled up just to step onto her back deck—and even then, only for a few minutes—but there was no getting around it. January in Wisconsin could be brutal, and tonight the temperature was in the teens. Better to be bundled up than risk frostbite.

Once properly clad, she slid open the patio door and stepped out, closing the door behind her so that the cat wouldn't wander out. The night sky domed above her, the cold air showcasing the stars and a big bright moon hanging like a peach ripe for the picking. The shadow of the eclipse had already started to creep over the edge of the moon. The cast of light was a slight orange-red rather than the promised blood-red, but that didn't matter. It was really something. Awestruck, she gazed at the remarkable beauty.

Pulling off her gloves, she reached into her pocket for her phone. Once she had the moon centered in the frame, she enlarged the image and snapped. The resulting photo was unlikely to do it justice, she thought ruefully. Some things were best viewed in real time, not pixels.

As Sharon lowered her phone, an illuminated window at the neighbors' house caught her attention. Someone was in the kitchen. She narrowed her eyes, trying to get a better look. A girl washing dishes by hand. A young child—maybe five or six? It was hard to say from this distance, but it definitely wasn't an adult or even a teenager. The proportions of the girl made it look like she might be standing on a step stool. Sharon had been certain the Flemings had only one kid, the teenage boy. Was it possible they had another child she didn't know about? Unlikely, she thought. Maybe a visitor? Possibly, but why would a girl that young be washing dishes at eleven o'clock at night?

From her spot on the deck, Sharon took a few pictures of the girl and then stepped down to cross the backyard. The powdery snow kicked up with each step, the chill of the air making her aware of every breath. Close to the fence was a raised planting bed, edged by railroad ties. Sharon stepped up onto the ties and carefully stood on her tiptoes, holding the

phone up until the window was in view. After waiting for it to auto adjust, she clicked.

As she watched, another person became visible in the window: the lady of the house. Suzette hovered over the child in a way that didn't seem friendly. The woman's lips moved rapidly, causing the child to shrink away from her. Sharon gasped as Mrs. Fleming yanked on the girl's arm and pointed to something inside the house that wasn't visible to Sharon. A second later, they both moved out of sight.

*What was that all about? So weird.*

Sharon went back into the house, shook off her winter gear, and settled onto the couch to look at the pictures she'd taken. Just as she'd thought, the moon didn't look nearly as impressive in the photo. The picture of the girl she'd snapped from the deck was barely a silhouette. A person-shaped blob. The photo she'd taken at the fence was better, but still not great. The lack of clarity was probably user error, she thought. Even though she tried to keep up with technology, she fell short in so many ways. She couldn't count the times Amy had said, "It's not that difficult, Mom. You're overthinking it."

Easy for her to say. She'd grown up with the technology and had learned as it evolved. Sharon didn't have that advantage. She still remembered when microwave ovens had come on the scene and everyone had marveled at how quickly you could bake a potato. Which wasn't actually a baked potato since it was microwaved, but that wasn't the point. Cooking a potato that quickly was akin to something miraculous. Around the same time, the idea of videotaping a show and watching it at one's leisure had been something new. Now that was old hat. With the online streaming they had now, the idea of videotaping was as dated as a buggy whip.

One of these days she'd have to figure out how to do that streaming. It sounded darn convenient, being able to choose movies and TV shows and see them right that very minute. Like having a jukebox in her house, but instead of music she could pick what she wanted to watch.

She could have listed a hundred things like that—miraculous technologies and devices that didn't exist when she was young and now were such a part of the landscape that no one made much of them at all.

Life changed so quickly nowadays. It was hard to keep up sometimes.

Later, when she was in bed, she thought again about the little girl. There had to be a good reason, or at least a *plausible* reason, why a child was



standing at the Flemings' kitchen sink at eleven o'clock at night washing dishes. Had to be. Puzzling over it was just a waste of time. Clearly, Sharon had been watching too many crime shows and reading too many thrillers. Still, her mind wouldn't let it go. She sighed and then made herself a promise, a compromise to put her worries at ease. If she could come up with one reasonable scenario, she'd allow herself the option of forgetting the whole thing. Her mind ran over multiple ideas until it settled on one. Perhaps, she thought, the girl was a relative visiting from out of town. And maybe, just maybe, the girl had gotten up out of bed to get a drink of water, then lingered to play in the water. Mrs. Fleming had appeared irritated because she was chiding the child for messing around in the sink when she should have been sleeping.

Put that way, it made perfect sense. Clearly, something like that was at play here. Feeling better, Sharon drifted off to sleep.

## CHAPTER THREE

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Sharon planned to talk to her daughter about the little girl in the window during their next conversation. The best approach would be to send the image through her phone so that Amy would have it for reference. She knew she wouldn't be able to do it, though, until Amy walked her through the process of texting an image, and that would be starting something. Sharon dreaded asking for help. Amy was apt to be impatient at having to explain it *again*, something that made Sharon feel like an idiot. "It's not that hard," she'd say, and Sharon had to admit she was right. It wasn't that hard. So why didn't it stick in her brain?

She was pretty sure the icon used for sharing photos was the little *V* with the circles on each end, the one that reminded her of *Star Trek* for some reason, but she was afraid to try it without double-checking first. "Why can't they just put the word *share* there?" she'd wondered aloud the first time they'd discussed it. "That would be so much easier."

"No, this is easier, and *better*," Amy had firmly stated, proceeding to make her case. "Because this way anyone can tell at a glance. The same way you instinctively know which symbol is the on button for all your devices." Sharon didn't have the heart to tell her that for the longest time the only way she could remember which one was the on button was by reminding herself that it looked like the outline of a teeny breast.

Amy was a real go-getter, an attorney who worked in corporate law. Her new job on the East Coast involved something with contracts for the shipping industry. It all sounded very dry and uninteresting to Sharon, but Amy thrived on the art of negotiation and studying the fine print. She was

good at it, judging by her very large salary. Sharon was proud of her, even if she didn't always understand her.

Before Sharon retired, she'd envisioned her golden years as a chance for her and her daughter to spend more time together, but after Amy moved, Sharon had revised the dream and thought it would be an opportunity for her to take classes and do volunteer work. In theory it was a good idea, but soon after leaving the world of employment, she had discovered the joy of having a wide-open schedule, and she'd never looked back. Sweet freedom was doing what she wanted, when she wanted, and not having to account to anyone. Sharon liked her life, even if it was a little lonely at times.

She wasn't looking for trouble with the neighbors, but the little girl she'd glimpsed the previous night was on her mind first thing when she woke. Amy's insight into the matter could only help.

But when Amy unexpectedly called later that morning, the topic of the mystery child flew out of her head. Sharon was eating breakfast at the time, but she set her spoon aside to answer.

After exchanging greetings, Amy got straight to the point. "Mom, I hate to ask this of you, but I need a favor."

Sharon sucked in a breath. Amy never asked for anything. Even as a small child she'd shaken off Sharon's efforts to help, determined to figure everything out on her own. If she was asking her mother for a favor, it was only because she hadn't figured out any other way around it. "Sure, baby girl. What do you need?"

She could hear Amy's relief coming through the line. "I knew I could count on you," she said.

"Of course. Anything for you."

"Well, it's not for me, exactly," Amy said. "It's Nikita."

*Nikita?* Sharon had a sinking feeling. Nikita Ramos was a foster child Amy had been connected with in her volunteer work as a CASA—court-appointed special advocate. At the time, Amy hadn't said too much about Nikita—only that she'd been in foster care since she was twelve and that life was a constant struggle for her.

Sharon had only met Nikita once, and that had been before Amy moved to Boston, when Sharon had accidentally run into Amy and the girl shopping at the mall. Amy introduced them, and Sharon noticed how Nikita sized her up with one long look. Of course, Sharon did the same thing right back. Nikita struck her as one of those tough girls, both in body language

and appearance. Her long hair was dyed raven black with one purple strip, and her T-shirt was black as well, with a large skull on the front, a snake dripping out of one eye socket. It was like she wanted to be stereotyped as someone not to be messed with. She seemed antsy, too, like she was overdue for a cigarette or something worse. Nikita had said hello and that it was nice to meet her, but the girl had never met her gaze, something that had struck Sharon as being suspicious.

“What about Nikita?” Sharon asked now.

“She needs a place to stay, and I thought, well, you’re all alone there with the empty bedroom upstairs.” Amy had a habit of making a statement and just letting it sit there, waiting for the other person to react. It wasn’t from reticence, Sharon knew. Her daughter could be shockingly bold when it was necessary. This pause was a strategy, an opportunity for Sharon to come around to Amy’s way of thinking.

“So you want her to live here?” Sharon said. Objections flooded her brain. She hadn’t been upstairs in ages and had no idea what condition the room was in. And having a teenager come and live with her? She’d barely known how to raise her own daughter, and Amy had been so easy. A model child, by most people’s standards. What did teenagers even eat nowadays? And who knew what kind of emotional baggage a former foster child would have. What if Nikita did damage to the house or was violent? What if she hurt the cat? Sharon shuddered at the thought. There were so many reasons to say no, but she knew Amy wouldn’t ask if it weren’t important. And she certainly wouldn’t deliberately put her own mother in danger.

Amy said, “Just for a little while. She called and sounded desperate, said she couldn’t stay there another night. She was frantic, ready to leave right that minute, but I talked her into staying until I could figure something out. Honestly, I don’t know what the hell’s going on. She wouldn’t tell me, but I know she needs to get out of there right away.”

“Wait a minute,” Sharon said. “Back up. I thought she aged out of foster care.” She was certain of this, remembering how Amy had taken a role in helping Nikita find housing after her high school graduation. By that point Amy had moved to Boston, but she’d flown back to Wisconsin to make the arrangements. Amy had a good heart.

“Yeah, she did, and she’s lived in several places since then. I know what you’re thinking, Mom. You’re thinking that all this moving around makes her sound like she’s a problem.”