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Man  
in the  
Blue  
Moon

M I C H A E L  
M O R R I S

# Advance Praise for *Man in the Blue Moon*

“Michael Morris has been one of my favorite Southern writers. His new novel is reason for great celebration. *Man in the Blue Moon* is a beautifully wrought portrayal of small-town Southern life where poverty, tragedy, and human love engage in a ritualistic dance. His portrait of Dead Lakes, Florida, is one of the best portraits of a small Southern town I’ve ever encountered. His main character, Ella Wallace, is fascinating, and Mr. Morris is one of those rare writers whose females are as fully formed individuals as his males. Buy it. Read it.”

PAT CONROY, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Michael Morris is a wonderful writer with a unique gift—he can break your heart and mend it, all in the same sentence.”

PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY, author of *Coming Up for Air*

“The magic of turn-of-the-century Old Florida, in all its pain and natural beauty, has found its voice with native son Michael Morris in his latest novel. Told in a multitude of voices, all desperate, all determined, *Man in the Blue Moon* spins a delicate, unforgettable family drama of abandonment and grit and redemption from unlikely sources. Morris describes with a pitch-perfect ear a vanishing rural culture of timber-cuts and bank foreclosures, where hard-held faith was not a luxury but a necessity for survival. Florida is lucky to have him.”

JANIS OWENS, author of *My Brother Michael* and *The Cracker Kitchen*

“Now that I have read *Man in the Blue Moon*, I’m suffering anxiety pains waiting for a publication date. Our book clubs continually select Michael’s titles, and [this] is his best work by far. Every member of our staff will ‘dig’ this delightful story of an innocent time in the South and the marvelous characters that delight and disappoint.”

JAKE REISS, owner, The Alabama Booksmith, Birmingham, AL

“This new novel by Michael Morris not only effortlessly transported me to Apalachicola, Florida, but back in time. . . . The characters are all so believable. . . . Morris is such a visual writer that I could see the story unfold in my mind like a movie as I read it. . . . I can’t wait to sell this wonderful novel to all my customers who love fiction.”

MARY GAY SHIPLEY, owner, That Bookstore in Blytheville, Blytheville, AR

“*Man in the Blue Moon* is incredible. This novel will appeal to a wide range of readers. I really loved this book!”

KARIN WILSON, owner, Page & Palette, Fairhope, AL

“I loved *Man in the Blue Moon*! Finished it Saturday and have been thinking about it ever since. . . . One of the keys to hand-selling is the story behind the book, and Michael Morris has got a doozy with this one! . . . Make no mistake—his storytelling is original, compelling, and extremely descriptive.”

SALLY BREWSTER, owner, Park Road Books, Charlotte, NC

“As a Southern bookseller, we have missed the voice of Michael Morris since *A Place Called Wiregrass* and *Slow Way Home*. *Man in the Blue Moon* is another of those stories from a true Southern writer with a keen sense of a good story.”

TOM WARNER, owner, Litchfield Books, Pawleys Island, SC

“If ever there was a perfect book for my book club it would be *Man in the Blue Moon*! It’s all about the story for me and this one is pure MAGIC! We have characters that we develop a vested interest in [and] enchanted storytelling at its finest! . . . A real page-turner and one that will keep the home “book reading” fires burning!”

KATHY L. PATRICK, founder of The Pulpwood Queens and Timber Guys Book Clubs

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*Man in the Blue Moon*

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*Man in the Blue Moon* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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# I

While world leaders stood on platforms and predicted the end of World War I, Ella Wallace stood behind a cash register in a country store and knew without a doubt that her battle was just beginning.

Through the open door Ella could make out the calico-colored cat she constantly shooed away from the store. It climbed down a cypress tree draped in Spanish moss and was careful not to step into the murky water at the edge of the low-lying lake that gave Dead Lakes, Florida, its name.

The cat then trotted across the dirt road and dashed in front of a wagon loaded with sacks of horse feed. It paused long enough to rub its back against the lowest stair leading into Ella's store. It looked up and turned its head as if it knew Ella was watching.

Chimes shaped like Chinese lanterns hung above the store door. They twisted in the late-May breeze and called out as the cat entered. It arched its back and pawed at a clump of tobacco-stained sawdust on the floor.

Ella didn't take a step toward the cat. She wondered if she could move at all. In all her thirty-five years, she never thought she would wind up on the verge of financial and emotional collapse.

Staring back at her in the glass window etched with the words *Wallace Commissary* was a reflection Ella no longer wanted to acknowledge. Hints of gray were beginning to streak her black hair, and weariness was settling in her blue eyes. Only the full lips that her husband had once called “deliciously pouty” remained of the seventeen-year-old girl who, against her aunt’s wishes, had wed Harlan Wallace in the parlor of a circuit judge he’d once beaten in a poker game. Ella had ignored her aunt’s warnings at the time, but there was no denying them now. “He’s a gambler at best. A con artist at worst,” her aunt had said of the handlebar-mustached man who snatched Ella away from her dreams of studying art in France. Ella’s aunt had known the French consul back when the country had an office in Apalachicola. Her aunt Katherine had planned the trip to study abroad the same way she orchestrated everything else in Ella’s life. Now that dream, like the country itself, was ravaged.

Eighteen years later, here Ella stood, struggling to keep the store she had never wanted from being foreclosed on and trying to support the three sons who were still at home and depended on her.

Ella gripped two letters, one from the Blue Moon Clock Company and another from Gillespie Savings and Loan. Watching the minister’s wife, Myer Simpson, finger through a stack of cloth, Ella held the letters flat in her hands like weighted tarot cards. She hoped one would outweigh the other and give her an indication as to which to follow.

Ella could either scrape together enough to make a partial payment on the second mortgage her husband had taken out on their property, or she could gamble on paying the freight charges for a clock her husband must have ordered before he disappeared.

Myer Simpson held up daisy-printed cloth and popped it in the air. Dust danced in the light. Ella used the clock-company envelope to shade her eyes from the early-morning sun that seeped in through the windows. Her thoughts were as scattered as the dust.

With the clock, she stood a chance of selling it and making a profit. The letter didn't say that freight charges for the delivery were covered, only that the clock itself was paid for in full. She hoped if she pulled aside some money to pay the freight, she could sell the clock and use the profit to make a higher payment on the past-due loan. "*You're robbing Peter to pay Paul,*" Ella heard her fearful aunt Katherine call out in her mind. For the past three months, the bank loan had been paid in portions that never equaled the total amount due.

Clive Gillespie, the banker, had made it clear to Ella that she was legally responsible for her husband's bad decisions. "The eyes of the law have no cataracts," Gillespie continuously reminded her before pushing her to sell him the property.

The land that her husband had taken over as his own was the last possession she had left of her father's. His gold watch, the diamond-studded tie clip, and the curls of hair that her father had maintained until death belonged to President Lincoln—they had all been sold, one by one, to cover her husband's debts. The tract of land that sat on the Florida panhandle was thick with pines and cypress. An artesian spring fed a pool of water that local Indians claimed could remedy gout and arthritis. The acreage had been in her family for two generations. Before her parents had died of typhoid fever, her father had given her strict instructions to use the land but never to sell it.

Ella had been only eleven when her father died, but whenever she thought of him, she still felt the grip of his fingers around her wrist as he leaned up on the side of his deathbed. His words were tangled in the bloody mucus that was suffocating him. Ella struggled to turn away but his bony fingers dug deeper into her. "Hold on to your land," he wheezed. "It's your birthright. Don't forget whose you are and where you come from."

But that was long ago. That was before she met Harlan Wallace and accepted his proposal to join their lives and livelihoods together. That was certainly before she had learned through Mr. Gillespie that



her husband had taken out a second mortgage on the property. The banker never seemed to believe her when she told him that Harlan had forged her signature.

“How much for this red polka-dotted one?” Myer Simpson held up the cloth with the edge of her fingertip. She eyed Ella through the tops of her glasses. Her pointy nose and collapsed chin always reminded Ella of a hedgehog. “It’s got a nick at the bottom,” she added.

“Does a nickel sound fair?” Ella asked.

“Three cents sounds fairer.”

As she paid for the cloth, Myer Simpson used the newspaper with President Wilson’s picture on the front page to fan herself. “You heard about Judge Willughby’s son?”

“So sad,” Ella said. “So young.”

“They tell me he died in the middle of the ocean. In a submarine. Can you imagine? Losing your boy in a contraption like that . . . in the middle of the ocean, no less.” With her fingers spread across the face of President Wilson, Mrs. Simpson lifted the edge of her straw hat and fanned her scalp. She paused long enough to point toward the spot on the shelf where bags of sugar had once sat. “When in the world will you get some more sugar?”

“I can’t get a straight answer. All I hear is not to sell more than half a pound a week, and I can’t even get the first pound.”

Myer Simpson frowned and fanned faster. “The way this war is going on, if I ever see sugar again, it will be a miracle. President Wilson keeps talking about peace, but I don’t know what this world is coming to. Wars and plagues . . . well, just last week I received a letter from my sister in Kansas. She says hundreds of boys at Fort Riley came down with some sort of flu. Strapping boys dropping dead . . . just like that.” Myer Simpson swatted the air with the folded newspaper. “Mark my word, we’re living in the end times.”

A breeze swept in through the store door, and the chimes called

out, soothing the air. Ella welcomed the distraction. She was anxious enough as it was. She didn't need the added burden of dire revelations.

Myer Simpson smiled at Ella in a way that made her feel uncomfortable. It was an expression that Ella took as a show of pity. "We've been missing you at church. Do you think we'll see you this Sunday?"

To avoid Myer Simpson's stare, Ella looked down at the counter.

"Now, Ella, not to pry," Myer said, moving closer, "but you know what Reverend Simpson says: we can be bitter or we can be better."

Ella felt a panicked grip on her chest. Her eyes landed on the Blue Moon Clock logo on the envelope in her hand. It was a cartoonish drawing of a full blue moon shaped like a man's smiling face. "Mrs. Simpson, would you have any need for a clock?"

Myer Simpson recoiled backward. "What? No. Now I'm talking to you about—"

"I have a clock being delivered by steamboat to Apalachicola. It's beautiful," Ella said without knowing anything about the item her husband had ordered. "Handcrafted. Walnut, I believe. I just thought that maybe you'd . . ."

"Where's it coming from?"

Ella flipped the envelope back over and looked at the return address. "Bainbridge, Georgia."

"What use do I have with another clock? I've got a fine clock sitting right on my mantel," Myer Simpson said while placing her purchase in a wicker bag. When she got to the edge of the door next to a barrel of apples, she paused and lifted her finger. "My daughter, Mary Francis, might be interested, though. When you get it, I'll take a look." She stepped outside and then came back, leaning halfway into the store until her drooping bosom brushed against the peeling doorframe. "If it's a grandfather clock, I especially want to see it. I've always wanted one of those."

Ella didn't even bother to put the Closed sign up on the door

when she locked it. She snatched the Blue Moon envelope from the counter and yanked off her apron.

On the back porch of the store, Ella tried to step past Narsissa, who was sweeping sawdust into an organized pile. A Creek Indian, Narsissa had shown up at the store with all of her possessions wrapped in a gingham quilt, wanting to work until she had enough money to buy passage to Brazil. Six years later she was still living in a converted smokehouse behind Ella's home. She stopped sweeping and stuck out her boot. "Where are you running off to?"

"I've made up my mind. I'm getting that clock." Ella stepped over Narsissa's boot and walked down the wooden stairs and toward the white clapboard home that was guarded by a sunflower garden. She didn't have to look back to know that Narsissa was shaking her head in disapproval. Her braided hair, as thick as a horse's tail, would be swinging back and forth.

Narsissa had made her opinion known about the mysterious letter last night at supper. "The last thing you need to go and do is upset that bank man. He's told you and told you—he will take this place. He's not playing, either." Ella tried to forget the words of caution. Besides, Narsissa was too cautious for her own good. If she had been of a nature to gamble for something better, she would have left a long time ago for Brazil in search of the husband who supposedly awaited her.

It was just a clock, Ella kept telling herself as she walked through the back door of her home and smelled the turnips that were stewing on the woodstove. If nothing else, she could give it to Mr. Busby, the picture taker, and let him take it on his circuit. He could sell it just like he had all her father's other possessions, and she could split the money with him again.

Ella reached for a log that was stacked atop a pile in the corner, and a lizard ran out. She snatched it up by the tail and jerked open the screen door. As she threw the lizard outside, Ella was sideswiped

by the fear that she, too, would be tossed out of her home. She pictured the fear that had become a constant tormentor as a black mushroom clamped to the side of her brain, a deformity of sorts that she had begun to accept as her lot in life. She put another log in the stove and poked at the embers extra hard, causing sparks to fly out. She never paused to realize that before Harlan's afflictions, the idea of catching a lizard by the tail would have caused her to shiver.

"Samuel . . . Samuel, are you here?" Ella could smell the salve from the hallway. She followed the scent to her youngest son, Macon. He was propped up on the bed, his throat swollen and blisters the size of quarters covering the outside of his lips. Sweat lined Macon's forehead, and when he turned to look at Ella, his cheeks seemed gaunter than they had the day before.

"Did he eat anything?" Ella asked her other son, Keaton. Then, not wanting Macon to think that she thought he was invisible, she turned to him and wiped his brow with the rag that was in the basin next to the bed. "Baby, did you manage to eat any breakfast?"

Both boys shook their heads at the same time. There were seven years between them, yet Macon looked more like he was three instead of six. The virus that wouldn't let go had caused him to seemingly shrink until there were nights when Ella dreamed that she walked into his room and found nothing more than a son the size of an acorn.

In desperation, Ella had even used some of the mortgage money to hire an internist from Panama City to make a house visit. The doctor had arrived with a medical bag made of cowhide. When he set the bag on the edge of the bed, Ella noticed that it was ripped in the corner, revealing discolored cardboard. The doctor spread his tools across the nightstand next to Macon's bed and anointed Ella's oldest son, Samuel, his assistant. "I take it you're the man around the place now that your daddy has run off from the henhouse," the doctor said without looking at Ella. Samuel rubbed the sparse goatee that he was trying to grow on his sixteen-year-old chin and nodded.

When Keaton stepped forward to get a closer look at the scratched silver tools on the nightstand, Samuel jerked his brother away and shoved him back toward the spot where Ella stood at the bedroom door. While the doctor prodded and poked Macon, he rambled on about a weakened constitution caused from parasites.

“You know how boys this age can be. He’ll eat the dirt and anything that’s in it,” the doctor had said. “A virus in the chicken pox family,” he declared. “He’s still puny because the illness is aggravated by his asthma. He’ll be back to running around in no time.” Ella followed the doctor’s instructions to the letter, preparing coffee so thick that it looked like mud. She mixed in the powder that the man had magically pulled from his bag. Macon gagged and vomited when she fed it to him. By the fifth day, she had heeded Macon’s plea to stop making him sicker.

“Well,” Ella said as she sat on the side of Macon’s bed. “What if I get you some candy? Not that cheap candy from our store . . . genuine salt water taffy from the dock.” She watched her ailing son’s eyes light up. He loved the taffy that came straight from the boats that docked in the bay at Apalachicola. Back when times were better, he’d gone with his father to town every chance he had.

“We’re going to town today?” Keaton, the middle son, asked. There was a stitch of hair above his lip. It was a constant reminder to Ella that he was a boy trapped inside a body that was becoming a man.

“I’ve decided to go ahead and pick up that shipment from the clock company.”

Keaton jumped up from the wooden chair and shuffled his feet in a playful way that made Macon laugh and then grimace in pain. Before Ella could touch Macon’s forehead again, her youngest son sighed, expressing the frustration they all felt toward the illness that not even Narsissa with her herbs and chants could eradicate.

“Where has Samuel run off to now?” Ella asked. Since the day the

doctor had prescribed him the role of head of the household, Samuel had taken the responsibility with a seriousness that at first made Ella proud. Now his arrogance was irritating. It was, she realized, the same overconfidence that had first attracted her to his father.

“Samuel is still out squirrel hunting,” Keaton said. His eyes were green like her father’s had been. Of the three boys, Keaton was the one who felt most like hers, seemingly untainted by the troubled blood of her husband.

“Please get him. Ask him to hitch the wagon. And ask Narsissa to come inside. She can stay with Macon until we get back from town.”

Inside her bedroom, Ella looked into the spider-veined mirror above her dresser. Pulling her hair into a twist against the nape of her neck, she snatched out a gray strand. She put on the earrings Narsissa had made for her out of baby mockingbird feathers and oyster shells. Fingering the dangling earrings, she felt that by wearing them she somehow paid homage to the young woman she used to be. That young woman, who had been sent to attend finishing school in Apalachicola by the aunt with dreams, had become nothing more than a mist that sprinkled her memories. For some odd reason, Ella could still recite bits and pieces of a poem from English class. A verse about the eyes being the mirror to the soul. Pulling back the skin around her forehead and causing the wrinkles to momentarily disappear, Ella studied her eyes. There was dullness now that resembled the marbles her sons played with in the dirt. She snatched up a doily that her aunt had knit years ago and flung it over the mirror.

After she had dressed in the last gift her husband had given her, a dropped-waist lilac-colored dress shipped from Atlanta, Ella kissed Macon on the forehead and tried not to look at the open sores lining his swollen lips. Narsissa sat in the chair next to the bed. She had brought the butter churn inside and with a steady rhythm pumped the wooden handle.

As Ella rose up from kissing her son, loose ends of Narsissa's hair tickled her arm. Narsissa leaned close and whispered in that gravelled voice that always made Ella think she was part man, "Don't pay that steamboat company one cent until you see what you are getting because—"

"Narsissa, please don't." Ella pulled away and straightened the top of her dress. "Don't patronize. Not today."

Narsissa leaned back in the chair and made a mulish huffing sound. She flung her coarse braid and continued churning the butter.

"When I come back, I'll have that taffy for you, and a surprise," Ella told Macon. "I'll have a surprise waiting."

Macon tried to smile, but his chin quivered. Kissing her finger, Ella pointed at her son and then kissed it once more and pointed at Narsissa, who pretended not to notice.

Outside, Samuel was squinting as he jerked the halter on the draft mule and led the wagon closer to the back of the store. Ella saw her oldest son watching her, studying her through the gaps in the tall sunflowers she had planted years ago for beauty as much as for a border between their family life and the life meant for income.

"Mama, can I go to the picture show?" Keaton asked as he climbed into the back of the wagon.

"We'll see."

Samuel climbed up on the wagon, and Ella felt his leg brush against hers. At least he didn't pull away. Keaton leaned in from behind and jabbed Samuel. "Clayton Carson says there's one playing about a preacher . . . I mean a priest. See, he protects these people over there in the war. The people over in France. He protects them from the Germans."

Samuel shrugged Keaton away. "We won't have time to go to no picture. We need to just get this package that we're probably paying too much money for and get back to the store."

"You're beginning to sound as crotchety as Narsissa," Ella said.

“As it is, we’re missing out on the busiest time of the day.” Samuel popped the reins, and the mule bobbed his head.

“Need I remind you, the letter said that the package was paid in full? If we have to pay the freight, so be it,” Ella said, trying to convince herself as much as Samuel. “And another thing . . . we work at that store six days a week from sunup to sundown. It won’t kill anybody to have an afternoon off.”

“*The Cross Bearer*—that’s the name of the picture. *The Cross Bearer*,” Keaton said.

The rocking motion of the wagon seemed to pacify everyone but Ella. She kept toying at her wedding ring, flicking it around her finger until it threatened to rub the skin raw. Her thoughts and fears alternated back and forth between her son’s disease and her husband’s desertion. No one spoke for the remainder of the thirty-five-minute ride to Apalachicola.

Along the way they passed the few buildings that made up the Dead Lakes community. A church with a weathered cemetery and a schoolhouse that rested on cinder blocks marked the official spot where Dead Lakes was noted on the Florida map. The store, like Ella herself, was distant from the center of the village. Ella enjoyed the wide porch that swept around the side of her clapboard house and the acreage of timber that obstructed her view from neighbors on either side. There were the occasional visitors to the aquifer spring that the Creek Indians vowed had healing properties. Sometimes during summer evenings when Ella sat on the porch rocking in the chair that Harlan had ordered for her special from North Carolina, she could hear muffled voices and splashing water from the hidden pool. Even Harlan had heeded Narsissa’s warning that calamity would fall on his family if he barred access to those he deemed superstitious fools.

Although Ella had privacy on either side of her, the front of her house was clearly visible to the neighbors who lived across the road. When times were good and her worries fewer, Ella used to



pity her neighbors for their lack of privacy. Their houses were built so close to one another that Mrs. Pomeroy, the doughy-cheeked woman who lived with her middle-aged husband in the house with the red door, routinely came into the store complaining about the eavesdropping Myer Simpson, who lived with the reverend in the parsonage next door.

When the wagon passed the gray-shingled house that belonged to the woman who had once been Ella's confidante at finishing school, the mule bowed his head and chewed harder at the bit. Neva Clarkson was now the teacher in Dead Lakes. Washtubs filled with pansies covered the front lawn. Neva had been Ella's best friend until Harlan redirected his affections from Neva to Ella. Behind her back, the townspeople called Neva a certified old maid. There was a time when Ella had felt sorry for Neva. Now she envied her. A chill snaked down Ella's system and settled so deep that not even the spring sun could thaw it.

They made their way around the low-lying lakes and cypress trees draped in Spanish moss and headed toward the red clay fields, plowed and ready for planting. An island of trees and kudzu sat in the middle of the beekeeper's farm. Ella shaded her eyes and looked out at the land, wondering if Harlan had taken refuge in a place like this and was weaning himself off the opium. Maybe he had been hired on as a laborer at such a property and would come to his right mind when the poison cleared his system.

Harlan might have surrendered himself to the powdered substance, but Ella had not. Her emotions tilted back and forth between anger, despondency, and love for her husband. The only thing she knew for certain was that a part of her felt sorted through and broken, just like the field they passed.

The mule's hooves kept an uneven pace against the clay-dirt road. The wagon rocked and chains rattled. A hush settled over Ella and her sons.

Ella clasped her hands and pictured her husband passed out on a red velvet sofa stained with human liquids in one of the Chicago opium dens she read about in the newspaper.

Keaton leaned against the backboard of the wagon and pictured a dramatic priest pulling a sword from beneath his robe and defending people in a land unknown to him before the war.

Samuel gripped the reins tighter and pictured their store windows covered with plywood, a foreclosure notice dangling from the front door.

But none of them could fully picture the box with the logo of the Blue Moon Clock Company that awaited them or the ways in which opening that crate would forever change the direction of their lives.