

STRAWBERRY MOON



DONALD KNIGHT BEMAN

Strawberry Moon

Strawberry Moon

PreView

The Novel

Written By
Donald Knight Beman

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PreView

What Reviewers Have Said of My Earlier Novels

"Beman not only writes well, he has a gift for paranoia, too, 'a la Richard Matheson and Stephen King."
Mystery Scene.

"Donald Beman delivers real fear!"
Douglas Clegg
Author of *The Infinite.*

"Unforgettable eerie and sensual. Not to be missed!"
J. N. Williamson
Author of *Spree, Dark Masques, Bloodlines, The Haunt*
and dozens of other best selling horror novels.

"A page-turning thrill ride."
Douglas Clegg
Author of *The Children's Hour, Neverland, The Hour Before Dark* and many other popular 'scary' novels.

Disclaimer

While drawn from my youthful experiences growing up, recollections from my work experience in business, and my years as an art dealer and faculty in academe, *Avatar - Resurrection!* is a work of literary fiction; a novel. Names, characters, places and events described, referenced or portrayed are the product of my imagination and fantasies. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places and events is coincidental.

Table of Contents [01-27]

- Chapter 01 Dear Sara...
- Chapter 02 "Here Faith Died, Poisoned by This Charnel Air..."
- Chapter 03 "A Dream Within a Dream"
- Chapter 04 Please Forgive Me for Being So Rude
- Chapter 05 Greene Farms Catherine Greene
- Chapter 06 She Dissolved Into the Fading Dark of Night
- Chapter 07 Dr. Sharon Lucien: Part I
- Chapter 08 Sean's New Pied-à-Terre ... Start of a New Life
- Chapter 09 Merrywood Garden - Dr. Bruce Fanning
- Chapter 10 Oliver in England
- Chapter 11 Dear Sean.....Cathy
- Chapter 12 "Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned"
- Chapter 13 "To Sleep ... Perchance to Dream: Ay, There's the Rub"
- Chapter 14 Strawberry Moon Chapter 15 I'm Jealous!
- Chapter 16 BODY FOUND ... George Kraft, Staff Reporter
- Chapter 17 Cause of Death: Forced Removal of the Heart
- Chapter 18 Red Hook Inn
- Chapter 19 "Twas Noontide of Summer and Mid-Time of Night"
- Chapter 20 A Bit of Advice Regrading Dr. Koch
- Chapter 21 Woodstock I: Unaware They Were Not Alone
- Chapter 22 Woodstock II: Secrets and Little White Lies Chapter 23 Dear Bruce.....
- Chapter 24 Dear Sean.....
- Chapter 25 What the Hell are You Doing Here!
- Chapter 26 Oliver!
- Chapter 27 Thomas Cole House ... Catskill New York Table of Contents [28-53]

Table of Contents [28-53]

- Chapter 28 A Bad Penny Always Turns Up
Chapter 29 Your Ancient Silver Coin is Worth Millions!
Chapter 30 Dr. Sharon Lucien: Part II
Chapter 31 You Cannot Tell Anyone Everything
Chapter 32 "Spirits of the Dead"
Chapter 33 Thank You for Saving My Life Chapter 34 I'm Sorry for Being Such a Jerk Chapter
35 He's Dead! Murdered!
Chapter 36 "Dreams" ... One More to Go?
Chapter 37 POLICE CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS
Chapter 38 ORDER TO SHOW CAUSE: Index Number: 6066/91
Chapter 39 It Means You're Screwed
Chapter 40 You're Under Arrest for the Murder of.....
Chapter 41 Dr. Sharon Lucien: Part III
Chapter 42 God's Way of Punishing You
Chapter 43 Sean, this is my mother, Karen.....
Chapter 44 CONFIDENTIAL TRANSCRIPTS: MacDonald Hypnosis Sessions
Chapter 45 Our Standard Advance is \$5,000.00 Chapter 46 Treat or Trap?
Chapter 47 You Will Need it if You Go ... I Will Not Chapter 48 Dr. Sharon Charon!
Chapter 49 "And all I Loved, I Loved Alone"
Chapter 50 Out Running, Patricia? Or Flying?
Chapter 51 Full Wolf Moon
Chapter 52 Full Strawberry Moon
Chapter 53 Full Harvest Moon

Author's Notes

#

Strawberry Moon

CHAPTER 1

31 October

Dear Sara.....

Dear Sara.....

Congratulations!

Do we address you as President Potter or Dean Potter, now that the Trustees appointed you President of Hart College? And will they pay you two salaries for wearing two hats and make the pay retroactive, since you've been doing both jobs for two years? (Ha!!)

You asked me to share with you the 'real' reason, I resigned effective the end of the Spring term. It's the reason that I originally gave you: I want to write full-time. And it's not a spur-of-the-moment thing, I've been toying with it, and writing, for years.

I rented out my house (mortgage paid off) to a young couple. The rental income will cover the rent and utilities for my apartment and all of my personal needs. Having finally completed the restoration of that classic Austin Healy 3000, I found in a barn in Red Hook, I will have 'wheels' as the students like to say. What else do I need?

And contrary to the rumor mill fueled by students and those colleagues of ours, who do not know that I was married and I am what they call a widower, I am not gay.

*Yes, my dear friend, of course I will stay in touch with you.
Affectionately,*

Sean.....

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Strawberry Moon

CHAPTER 2

31 December

"Here Faith Died, Poisoned by This Charnel Air"

Sean MacDonald sat alone in the kitchen of his second-floor apartment in the aging Victorian farm house nursing a mug of just-brewed black coffee and watching the thin pink line of the horizon slowly etch itself into the left-over night sky.

Wondering how cold it was outside, Sean raised the sash halfway up: bitterly cold air flooded the kitchen along with the noise of a pair of crows arguing in the field across the road. Two more flew in, landed, and quickly weighed in on the debate, followed by a half-dozen more, their rowdy argument shattering the pre-dawn calm.

A sharp click from the ships clock on the wall beside the window announced it was about to add its two-cents worth to the argument as the hammer slowly struck the bell six times. Sean whispered "Seven o'clock" and set his mug on the window sill.

Picking up *The Old Farmer's Almanac* in his lap, Sean started flipping through the pages of what he playfully referred to as his 'Bible'. He stopped at page fifty, December, The Twelfth Month, and read the entry aloud: "Two full Moons this month, giving us a rare, and some say, unlucky thirteenth Moon. The first moon, on December second, causes very high tides because it occurs just three hours before the Moon's closest approach to earth in many years. The Moon's center is then just two hundred twenty one thousand five hundred and forty five miles from the Earth's center."

Skipping the remaining entries for December, Sean turned the page to January and began mentally checking-off the remaining days of the month with woodpecker-like taps of his finger on the page.....

- 7 Emperor Hirohito of Japan died, 1989; DDT banned, 1971.
- 8 'They say' is half a lie?
- 9 Snow and cold across the North.
- 10 Ethan Allen born, 1738.
- 11 No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible.
- 12 Moon at apogee**
- 13 1st Sunday after Epiphany.
- 14 Propitious day for birth of women.....

Sean abruptly stopped reading, when he was snagged by the memories from January,

Strawberry Moon

sixteen years ago. Slowly, steadily, the rising wind tickled then began to shake the leafless branches of the frozen trees, startling the raucous flock of crows. They exploded into the air as if shot out of a cannon, flapping, cawing and scattering every which way. Before Sean could shut the window, he was there again.....

.....stumbling out of Merrywood Hall into the colorless dark of the New Moon, punching through the crumbling surface of the melting snow, his shoes filling up with prickly beads of ice as he ran through the deep wet snow to the body. He dropped to his knees, his head and shoulders slumping down. Shallow breaths began collecting around his head in the heavy night air, a mystical halo of white, as the cardboard-thick wool of his pants began sucking up cold muddy water out of the ground.

Her arms were folded over her chest, which had been ripped open like a freshly dug grave and just as empty. Her long brown hair was splayed out from her skull as if pulled by vermin, tugging and chewing on the frayed ends. The earth had begun to reclaim her.

Sean reached down, his hands shaking, and lifted the mask of ice off her face. It crumbled through his fingers. He brushed away the shards left behind. Snow had melted in the sunken eye sockets and frozen into frameless lenses. He pried them out to find her eyes, once as bright and warm as a summer sunrise, now dark, dead, blindly staring up into the black of heaven. He bent over, as if to kiss her cracked and swollen lips, but suddenly, violently, began jamming his hands into her icy grave, again and again and again, until his fingers were red raw and bleeding.

Hands were reaching out behind him, gently tugging him, trying to help him stand up. His sleeve caught on her fingernails, as if she were pulling him down to her. He turned his head and shut his eyes, as if he were trying to hear what she was saying. But the beating of his own heart was the only sound that broke the silence of winter's clear night.

He noticed a crumpled-up wad of paper in her fist. As he tenderly pried open her clenched fingers, a blood-stained ball of paper tumbled out. He picked it up and held it to his chest as he stood up and walked away, deaf to the whispers.....

Sean angrily clapped the almanac shut and set it on the window sill. The wind reopened the almanac and began turning the pages. Something blew out. He snatched it in mid-air. It was a sheet of old parchment paper with writing on one side, penned in faded blood-red ink as if by a scribe centuries ago.....

Strawberry Moon

Here Faith died, poisoned by this charnel air.

I ceased to follow, for the knot of doubt

Was severed sharply with a cruel knife:

He circled thus, for ever tracing out

The series of the fraction left of Life;

Perpetual recurrence in the scope

Of but three terms:

Dead Faith, Dead Love, Dead Hope.

Life divided by that persistent three,

LXX divided by 333 =

.210210210210210210 ad infinitum.

"Damn you to hell! It's me you want. Why did you take my wife and our son!"

Dropping the sheet of parchment, Sean slammed the window shut, knocking the coffee mug and almanac onto the floor and shattering the window pane. Jagged shards of glass exploded outside and into the kitchen, hitting him, cutting through his shirt. He just sat there, staring outside, blood staining his clothes, tears running down his cheeks.

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Strawberry Moon

CHAPTER 5

29 May

Greene Farms ... Catherine Greene

Sean took the sharp left turn onto Molly Lane far too fast. The old tires on his restored Austin Healy 3000 roadster growled in protest, then broke free. Drifting sideways, heading for a barbed wire fence guarding a pasture, Sean down-shifted, floored it, regained control, and continued speeding down the narrow country road.

The wind began slapping at him, as if telling him to slow down. When he saw he was doing seventy, he let off the gas, gently pumped the brakes, slowed to a crawl and pulled off the road onto the grassy shoulder.

Leaning back, Sean withdrew a folded-up letter from his shirt pocket and read it for the umpteenth time.

Dear Dr. MacDonald:

When I learned of your resignation, I went to the college to see you. But every time I stopped by your office you were either with someone or not there. That is why I decided to write.

I would like you to be my guest at the farm. Perhaps for lunch or dinner? Greene Farms in Red Hook. You can't miss it, we're on both sides of the east end of Molly Lane.

The strawberries may be ready in time for Memorial Day weekend this year (which is early). We're expecting a bumper crop. No need to call. I'm a 'prisoner' here this time of year.

You can find me at our market. If it's really busy, you will have to go out into the fields to find me.

I'm looking forward to seeing you after all these years.

Sincerely,

Catherine (Cathy) Greene

Shutting his eyes, Sean had Catherine Greene in front of him: taller than all of the other young women; wind-blown shoulder-length straw blond hair; and an unforgettable warm smile, which came to life whenever she spoke to him.

As with all of the students who completed the *Writers in Residence* masters program after graduation, Sean made an effort to follow what Cathy was doing, but gave up. Not because he didn't want to, because he couldn't: Cathy had joined the Marines.

Strawberry Moon

Fifteen years later an article in the local newspaper reported that '*Captain Catherine Greene had retired due to combat-related injuries and returned home to Red Hook to take over the ownership and management of the family business*'.

Except for the dated graduation photograph accompanying the article, Sean had no idea what Cathy looked like almost twenty years older.

#

Sean took his place in the line of cars jerking their way along the side of the road. When he turned into the entrance and pulled to a stop at the make-shift gate house, a young woman announced with a smile, "Good morning! How may I help you?"

Sean replied, trying his best to sound like he knew what he was doing.

"I'm going to pick strawberries and string beans."

"String beans aren't in season yet, sir."

You should know that, MacDonald. You idiot.

Smiling, the young woman handed Sean a stack of green plastic baskets nesting one inside the other and still wet with fleshy chunks of strawberries. Before he could pull away, a tall woman working the opposite side of the stand, stepped around and held out the bottom of a cut-down cardboard box.

"Here," she instructed, tossing the box over his head onto the passenger seat.

"Use that for the baskets when they're full."

Sean spun around at the sound of the distinctive voice.

"Catherine?"

The car behind him beeped. Others joined in, adding their two-cents worth.

With Cathy's attention diverted, Sean was able to look at her more closely. To his surprise, he saw a tall full-figured woman, not the gangly girl etched into his memory.

With an authoritative wave of her hand for him to pull-away, Cathy added, "I'll find you in the fields a little later, Doctor MacDonald."

#

Homemade signs with large stenciled-on letters announced **STRAWBERRIES** in fire-engine-red paint with a cardboard cut-out arrow nailed to a wooden stake as if it were an afterthought. Sean turned, as instructed, to find another sign shouting **PEAS** in matching color, which called-up still more long-ago forgotten childhood memories.

Strawberry Moon

Sean passed row after row until he found that imaginary made-to-order patch of ground that let him park upwind of the dust blowing across the fields. Hopping out of the Healy, baskets in hand, Sean stepped over the first few dozen rows, glanced up-and-down one row, nodded, dropped the baskets onto the ground, knelt down, and started plucking off strawberries with a pinch of his fingers, filling his hand, sampling a strawberry with each handful, then depositing them into the basket.

With his baskets full, Sean laid back, shut his eyes and fell asleep.

#

Cathy teased, "Pass out from the shock of manual labor?" as she stepped out of the flat-bed truck, which did not have doors on the cab or fenders over any of the tires.

Sean sat up like a wind-up toy and shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun.

Cathy was standing beside the truck, finger-combing the wind-blown tangles out of her hair. Climbing to his feet, Sean dusted himself off, slowly and methodically, which ended with playful slaps of his backside as he started for the truck, grinning sheepishly. Cathy braced her hands on the heavy wooden planks of the truck bed and hopped up backwards with amazing ease and equal grace.

Sean came to a stop directly in front of her.

"Room for two up there?" he asked.

Before Sean could join her, Cathy braced her hands on his shoulders and vaulted off the truck, knocking him off balance. Sean started stumbling backwards and reached out to catch himself, only to grab hold of Cathy's shirt, pulling her off balance and tugging her shirt open at the same time. Sean landed flat on his back and got the wind knocked out of him, but he didn't for one second take his eyes off Cathy as she followed him down, landing on top of him, straddling him on her knees and jamming her hands into the dirt, bracing herself and stopping inches from his face.

"Miss Greene! What if someone sees us?"

Cathy asked, "What is there to see?" an angelic smile lighting up her face.

"And please call me Cathy. I'm only '*Miss Greene*' to my suppliers."

Seeing Sean glancing down, Cathy asked, "What are you staring at?" and looked down. Laughing, she buttoned her shirt, stood-up, and stepped onto the running board.

"When we didn't see you moving about anywhere out here, I decided to drive out to

Strawberry Moon

make sure you were okay." Cathy was stifling a private laugh. "But I guess I should have remembered all of those stories you told us in class about growing up on a small farm and known better." Cathy slipped behind the wheel, started the truck, spun the tires in the dirt, kicking up dust, as she circled around and came to a stop no more than a foot from Sean's toes. Holding the steering wheel with both hands, she leaned out of the door-less cab and kissed Sean on his cheek, rendering him speechless.

Cathy said with the calm self-assurance of a woman, not the girl he once knew as one of his students, "It's nice to see you again, Sean." She reached out and set her hand on his shoulder. "I don't know why it's taken me so long to invite you out here?"

Sean asked, "How about dinner tonight?" and felt his face warming to a blush.

Cathy said with a sigh, "I wish I could. I really do. But we're busy earlier than usual this year. Good busy! What about Sunday? I have a double crew on Sundays."

"I can't," Sean replied with a discouraged shake of his head. "Graduation."

Cathy said half seriously, "I guess it's just not meant to be."

Scrunching her face into a made-up pout, Cathy winked and pulled away.

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Strawberry Moon

CHAPTER 6

12 June

'She Dissolved Into the Fading Dark of Night'

She silently glided up to the door of Sean's office and paused. The door opened. She peered inside, her gaze raking the room as if checking to be certain it was safe for her to enter. Nodding, she walked in. The door closed without being touched. As she moved about the room, her black floor-length hooded cloak rubbed against the jagged corners of the cardboard cartons, brushing away the silence.

Sean's office had been stripped bare except for the oak file cabinet, which was topped with stacks of threadbare linen-jacketed journals. Over-stuffed cardboard boxes cluttered the floor, bulging at the seams.

In front of the empty bookshelves were cartons stacked in columns six high. The words BOOKS and HEAVY stenciled in black on the sides and tops of all boxes.

She noticed a sheaf of papers on the boxes and snatched them up.

Drifting over to the window, she sat on the deep stone sill and started thumbing through the papers in the moonlight, occasionally checking-off entries with a tap of her finger and approving nod or disapproving shake of her head.

Pausing, she stopped and read one of the dozen or so hand-written notes.

I did not find evidence in my research of surviving male off-spring. In the event the child conceived was a male, it for some reason died in the womb, turning to stone and producing what for centuries had been known as a 'calcified fetus', which would be deadly to the host. In the event a male fetus survived to full term ... six months ... it was born a mooncalf, a hideously deformed creature forever dependent upon its host. What is unclear is the birthing of the stronger fetuses, the females. From what little evidence there is, which was pieced together from shattered figurines found in various archeological ruins, which I find suspicious, it appears they may not be delivered vaginally, but abdominally. This belief is 'supported' by, the striated markings found on the stomachs of the pieced-together figurines, which represent scars. Considering a Caesarian birth is a modern practice, one could conclude they delivered themselves, leaving their host horribly scarred and most likely dead. The female's will to live must be ferocious!

She sneered, "If it were not so, your species would not, could not, exist."

Strawberry Moon

Skipping over a dozen entries, she stopped and continued reading.

"Men are afraid of women, because they sense that women are more powerful, sexually, than men are. Women are the true givers and takers of life here on earth. The role of men in the evolution of life is insignificant in the whole scheme of creation."

Nodding, as if agreeing with what she read, she glanced up and gazed outside.

The glow of the false morning star reflected in her eyes.

She turned her head, as if listening to someone or something.

Nodding, she returned the papers to where she found them.

Drifting back to the window, she dissolved into the fading dark of night.

#

Strawberry Moon

CHAPTER 12

24 June

"Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned"

The double doors for the main entrance to Merrywood Hall had been pulled wide open and braced with cut-down broom handles. The larger-than-life size bronze lions resting on either side of the steps appeared to be sleeping in the hazy heat of the day.

Sean walked in and headed down the darkened hall. The only sounds disturbing the cloistered quiet were the ceiling fans in some of the offices, whispering shhhhhhh.

The first office was Dean Potter's. He stepped up to the door, sniffed, again, and nodded when he detected the subtle scent of licorice, which Sara kept in a Waterford crystal jar on her desk.

Kicking off his shoes, grabbing one in each hand, Sean ran up the stairs to the second floor. Skating over the just-polished floor in his socks, he slid to a stop in front of Bruce Fanning's office.

"Shit!" Sean slapped the padlock Bruce had put on his office door.

Slipping on his loafers, Sean bolted downstairs and made a bee-line for the sunlight falling out of Oliver's doorway. The walls were covered with bookshelves, floor-to-ceiling, corner-to-corner. The seat of Oliver's threadbare upholstered wing chair was buried beneath outdated sections of *The London Times*. The crocheted antimacassars on the armrests and pinned to the headrest were stained dark with oil and sweat.

Sean scurried down the hall, intent upon leaving, but stopped when he spied a blade of light knifing out into the hall from his old office. Tip-toeing up to the door, he peeked inside and was surprised to see a dozen or so period paintings on the floor, tipped up against the wall, waiting to be hung up. One caught his attention. Slipping into the office, Sean gingerly picked up the painting and took it to the window.

"George Inness!" he whispered.

The overcast sky was soft and blond, with rouge brushed across the horizon. A hundred shades of brown and green had been scumbled over the canvas, creating the illusion of mountains in the background, fields covered with hay ready for harvesting and a figure gathering twigs.

Strawberry Moon

On the wall over the desk was a large marine painting filled with the serenity of an early summer morning, soft diffused light radiating from inside and far away. It was a harbor scene, with sailing ships asleep at anchor and a solitary vessel under way, sailing into the morning mist as if manned by a ghostly crew.

Sean scurried over for a closer look. "That's mine!" he muttered and snatched up the bronze sculpture on the table beneath the painting. Barely eight-inches tall, the bronze depicted a fox, a spindly legged stork and a raven gathered around an empty well, eyeing a tiny cluster of grapes hanging from a vine wrapped around a dying tree. "Recognize it?" a woman asked.

Sean spun around and found himself falling backwards in time...

.....Patricia cupped his face in her hands. He didn't reject her touch as she began smoothing away time with her fingertips, gently pushing his eyes shut. He didn't want her to stop. A bouquet of fragrances evaporated into his senses from her warm, moist hands, pulling him deeper into her touch. Patricia whispered, 'You're blushing' and kissed him. He drew the protective curtain of faculty down over himself and walked away to join his colleagues without saying anything more. Patricia left, too, walking through Merrywood Garden and up the wall of sandstone steps. It didn't look like she was running away from what had just happened, rather that she had somewhere else to go. She returned after dark, having changed into a shear ankle-length dress that revealed she wasn't wearing anything beneath the dress. She had showered, and without soap, leaving the natural scent of her body to find him.....

The night watchman, Andy Jensen, appeared in the doorway.

"Hello, Doctor Koch, still moving-in?"

He nodded to Sean. "You helping out, Doctor MacDonald?"

"Hi, Andy," Sean said with a lazy wave of his hand.

Andy stepped back and stood just outside the doorway.

"Miss your old office?"

Sean laughed. "No! Only my colleagues and you, Andy."

"We all miss you. Especially Dean Potter. You're all she talks about lately."

Andy appeared to sense he shouldn't be there.

"The front door will be locked in ten minutes. So unless you two want to spend the night here, you best be on your way."

Strawberry Moon

Andy turned and started down the hall, jangling keys as he locked the doors.

Patricia pulled the leaded stained glass windows shut and latched them with a slap of her hand. Sean watched as she walked around the office as if she were mentally taking inventory. Slipping her key into the door lock, Patricia looked back at Sean.

"Dinner?" she asked as she stepped into the hall and turned to face him.

Get out of here! Sean told himself as he walked out into the darkened hallway.

Patricia waved for Sean to follow her.

"Hurray! I don't want you to spend the night in here with me against your will."

Sean thought, *Worry not ... once bitten, twice shy.*

Patricia subtly turned her head as if she had read Sean's thoughts.

#

Strawberry Moon

CHAPTER 13

26 June

"To Sleep, Perchance to Dream: Ay, There's the Rub"

Dozens of straw hats were bobbing up and down under the watchful eye of the sun. Pulling off the road, Sean eased up to the gate house. Sally Curtis spun around.

"Hi, Doctor MacDonald!" She winked, wrinkling her face, confirming Sean's belief that she was much older than what he first thought. "Cathy's not back from the City. She called early this morning to tell me the reception at the museum ran well past midnight and she was staying with Martha MacGregor, the caterer who ordered the truckload of strawberries we all worked through the night picking, sorting, washing, drying and packing, all to Ms. MacGregor's specifications."

Sean asked, "Did Cathy say when she'd be back, Sally?"

"She said to tell you she didn't expect to be back until late tomorrow morning. She and the Martha person are going to another reception, but as guests. Some rich art dealer is having an opening at his gallery on Madison Avenue. She gave me a number for you to call in case you wanted to drive into the City and join her." Sally stuck her hand into her back pocket, retrieved a folded wad of paper and handed it to Sean. "I wrote the number on that piece of paper towel, since I was in the kitchen making coffee for the sunrise team, when Cathy called." Sally laughed. "Oh! And Cathy also said that if you decided to join her, that you had to wear a suit and tie."

Sally leaned out and peered down into Sean's lap as he unfolded the crumpled-up paper towel, only to find a row of smudged illegible numbers.

Sally gulped, "Oops! I didn't realize that I sweat so much. Cathy will kill me!"

Sean said reassuringly, "No she won't, she won't know." With smile and wink, Sean slowly pulled away, heeding the posted warnings...DRY FIELDS...BLOWING DUST...PLEASE SLOW DOWN...stapled to wooden stakes hammered into the ground.

Sean moved from one planted section to the next, until he reached the very last one at the farthest end of the field. Turning into the wind, he immediately half-shut his eyes against the sudden burst of blowing dust, but didn't stop until he saw a small white car up ahead. Squinting through his dust-covered windshield, Sean cautiously turned and rolled to a stop

Strawberry Moon

along side a white Dodge Shadow. The dinged doors, prompted him to back-up and pull-in again a few more feet away.

Hopping out, Sean snapped the tonneau in place and headed for the strawberry fields, but stopped and chided himself. "Damn! You forgot baskets, MacDonald. Duh!"

As he turned to go back to his car, he heard a woman call out, "I've got a few extras. Would you like them?"

Sean turned around. She stood up and slipped the large straw hat off her head, letting her cinnabar-red hair streaked with grey and white fall down onto her shoulders.

She was barefoot, which looked curiously out of sync with her white silk blouse and straight knee-length navy skirt decorated with dusty hand prints.

Sean pointed to her bare feet.

"Don't the rocks and hard clumps of dirt hurt your feet?"

"Toughens the feet and the soul." She laughed. "No pun intended." She then gestured to Sean's feet. "Take off your loafers. It's nice and cool below the surface."

With a shrug, Sean kicked-off his shoes and tossed them under his car.

"You're lucky," she said, shaking her head, unraveling more of her long hair. "They could have put quite a scratch in the thin skin of that classic Healy of yours."

Surprised, Sean asked, "How do you know it's a Healy? Not many....."

She raised her hand, silencing him.

"Not many 'women' know cars?"

She stuck her hands on her hips as if to challenge him.

Sean quickly said in his own defense, "Well, they don't. At least not when it comes to classic sports cars like mine."

"California women do." She smiled and gestured past Sean. "It's a nineteen sixty, right?" She really wasn't asking him to answer her. "Sounded like you keep her perfectly tuned. And she's almost original." She refocused her point. "Except for that right front wing, which looks like it was replaced or repaired in the last few years." Sean was fighting back a grin. "Is the leather Connolly or a domestic replacement cowhide?"

Sean threw up his hands in mock surrender. "Okay! You proved your point." He stepped closer. "Yes, the leather is original. I suppose now you want a ride in it."

"Wrong again," she replied, hands on her hips. "I want to drive it." She laughed, then

Strawberry Moon

added in a patronizing tone of voice, "With you in it of course."

That's all Sean needed to hear. "There's no need to have me along," and wished he hadn't said what he did. "I'm sure a California girl can handle it." He took-on her challenging gaze. "But before I give you my car keys, shouldn't I know who 'she' is?"

Dusting off her hands, she marched up to Sean and offered her hand.

"I'm Karen and you are?"

Shaking her hand, Sean replied, "Sean."

Karen pulled her hand back and wriggled her fingers.

"Keys?"

Sean withdrew the keys from the coin pocket of his jeans.

Karen plucked them out of his hand and started walking toward the car.

What the hell are you doing! Sean thought. *You don't even know her full name. Have you lost it, MacDonald?*

As if she read his thoughts, Karen called back over her shoulder, "Sure you don't want to come?" But she did not wait for his answer as she kept walking.

"No. Have fun," he called out, trying to mask his rapidly growing anxiety.

Brushing the dust off her skirt, Karen unsnapped the tonneau, taking care to pinch the grommets between her thumb and fingers so she didn't have to use two hands. Sean thought, *You do know what you're doing, don't you?* Karen then carefully folded the tonneau behind the seat, the way it should be done, before getting in.

She started the engine without so much as a flutter. Backing around, she slipped into first, waved over her head without looking back, and was on her way.

Sean stuck his hands into his back pockets and watched as she pulled out onto Molly Lane and disappeared behind the row of forsythia bushes bordering the road. He held his breath, listening. She was smooth and quick, taking the car through the gears without incident as the exhaust rose to a soft growl and faded into the distance.

Sean sat down, eased back onto the ground, then folded his arms over his face and let the sun warm him into a half-awake, half-asleep state he loved playing with.

#

Picking her steps carefully, Karen slowly walked up to Sean, knelt down, and tickled the bottom of his bare feet. He didn't budge. She ran the tip of the ignition key up and down his

Strawberry Moon

arch. His leg jerked, then flopped back down onto the ground.

"You must really be enjoying that dream," she whispered and scratched the soles of his feet with her fingernails. That did it. Sean threw his arms open and sat up.

His frown quickly softened to a smile, when he saw Karen smiling at him.

"You're soaking wet!" she said, plucking at his shirt. "Was she good?"

Blushing, Sean asked, "How long have you been gone?"

"As long as you were asleep."

Karen motioned behind her. "Your 'baby' has a full tank of gas....premium."

Karen stood up and waited for Sean's gaze to work its way up her body.

"You've got grease stains on your blouse," Sean noted.

Karen shrugged. "I peeked under the bonnet. You can learn a lot about someone by how they care for the engine."

Sean climbed to his feet and started dusting himself off.

"So....did 'Karen' like my Healy?"

"She 'loved' it!"

Karen stepped forward and tucked the car key into Sean's back pocket, then began brushing the dust off his shirt. "Are you alright?" She asked, pressing her hand on his neck, then his back. "You're soaking wet. Wrestling with a lady or a nightmare?"

Sean found himself at a loss for words as he began buttoning his shirt.

Karen knelt down, snatched up a basket, and started picking strawberries.

Kneeling beside her, Sean mirrored Karen's actions.

Nothing was said as they crawled between the rows of strawberry plants.

With a sudden wiggle, Karen pulled her skirt above her knees, folded-up the hem, and returned to foraging for strawberries. When her skirt slid back down, she stood up, walked to her car, reached into the back seat and pulled out a pair of jeans.

Turning her back to Sean, Karen slipped off her skirt, tossed it into the car, stepped into her jeans, wiggled them up, buttoned them, and started back.

"I've always thought that men should be the ones wearing skirts, not women. It makes so much more sense. Don't you agree, Sean?"

Startled at hearing Karen say his name, Sean sat back on his heels.

Seeing his expression, Karen asked, "Did I say something wrong?"

Strawberry Moon

"You know who I am?"

Karen replied matter-of-factly.

"Yes. One of your colleagues ... or former colleague now that you've 'gone over the wall' ... was a client of mine. I'm a literary agent."

Sean pleaded, "Forgive me for being...."

"Rude?"

Karen turned, walked away, knelt down and began picking strawberries again, this time without speaking or looking at him. Sean mirrored her actions. The silence was deafening. When they did finally speak, it was in fractured sentences and they only talked about places and things, not people, and not about themselves.

Withdrawing and opening a pocket knife, Sean selected a large ripe strawberry, rested it in the palm of one hand, then halved it from top to bottom with the knife. He cupped his hand to keep the juice from leaking through his fingers. To his surprise, Karen leaned forward and snatched up one of the strawberry halves with her tongue. Sean followed suit, repeating what Karen had done. He then leaned over and kissed her, and just as quickly pulled back, as if he was surprised by what he had done.

Smiling, Karen stood up and offered Sean her hand.

He tried standing, but couldn't, and blushed.

Karen laughed, "I'm flattered!" She then snatched up the baskets and started walking back to their cars. Sean was at her side before she was halfway there.

"Everything under control now 'young' man?"

Laughing, Sean gestured to the sun falling into the trees off in the distance.

"There's a full moon tonight. The Strawberry Moon."

"And?" she asked.

"The Strawberry Moon is thought by some to be the most erotic moon of the year. Folklore has it that you cannot keep from making love with anyone you're with, when the light of the Strawberry Moon falls on your face and into your heart."

Karen reached out and brushed the hair out of Sean's eyes, but said nothing. Sean suggested, "Let's come back tonight after the moon is up and have a midnight picnic. I will bring the champagne. I've got one bottle left from a party years ago, when I was still sociable. I will bring something special, something you may not have had." Sean held his breath,

Strawberry Moon

expecting Karen to tell him she couldn't, or worse, she didn't want to return. Her throaty laugh told him he couldn't have been more wrong.

Karen pointed across the road. "We can meet over there by that large rock. There's a narrow dirt road cut through the clutch of trees. Turn off your headlights long before before you reach the opening and pull off the road."

Sean began to ask Karen how she knew about the road, when she spun around to face him. "What time will your Strawberry Moon want us here, Doctor MacDonald?"

Sean paused to recall what he read in the Almanac this morning.

"Midnight!"

Karen laughed, "Midnight it is!" She then said in a firm business-like voice, "I must go now. I have some pressing business matters to take care of in Rhinecliff."

Sean watched Karen drive away. Part of him wondered, *Do you really think she will come?* Another part replied *Why not.* Still another part added, *Are you sure?*

#

Strawberry Moon

CHAPTER 14

27 June

STRAWBERRY MOON

Turning onto Molly Lane, Sean sped up, killed the head lights, slipped into neutral and coasted in silence as he searched for the cut in the road Karen told him about. Whispering, "There it is," he slowed to a stop, slipped into first gear, and slowly, cautiously, pulled off the road into the woods. Light from the rising full moon was slicing through the leafy branches overhead, cutting-up the road into jagged patches of yellow, gray and black. At the end of the road, Sean stopped and killed the engine.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, startling him.

Karen whispered, "I was afraid you wouldn't come."

She tousled his hair. "Follow me."

Grabbing a rolled-up blanket off the ground, Karen started down the path.

Sean snatched a canvas tote bag off the passenger seat, hopped out, and scurried after her as she melted into the night, forcing him to hurry and catch up as she darted out into the field and disappeared between the rows of young corn stalks.

Karen called back, "Hurry up slow-poke."

Sean sprinted past her and turned around.

Karen raised her hand, shielding her eyes from the bright glow of the full moon.

Sean brushed the tips of his fingers over her face.

"You look different."

"How so?" she asked.

"You look.....younger.....much younger!"

Karen laughed, "Maybe I am!" then slipped past him, darted to the end of the rows of corn, and stepped into a small clearing flooded with moonlight and snapped the blanket she was carrying into a billowing wave that settled down onto the ground.

Catching up, Sean kicked off his shoes, stepped onto the blanket and knelt down. Karen followed his lead and watched with curiosity as he withdrew a bottle of champagne from his tote bag, unwrapped the wire cage holding the cork prisoner, then slipped off the cork with both thumbs. The pop echoed across the field.

Strawberry Moon

Karen's unguarded laughter chased after it, which quickly infected Sean.

Sean offered Karen the bottle. Grasping the large bottle with both hands, Karen took a long slow sip. "This is heavenly! What is it," she asked and lifted the bottle into the air, turning it slowly in the one-sided light of the moon. "I can't read the label?"

Sean announced proudly, "Piper Heidsick, Flouren Louis, nineteen fifty-five."

He then reached into his tote bag and retrieved a plastic container filled with strawberries. Handing it to Karen, he blindly felt around inside the tote and produced a paring knife. Smiling, Karen twisted the champagne bottle into the soft earth beside her, snatched the knife away from Sean, and handed him the strawberries.

"You pluck off the leaves and stems. I will halve the strawberries."

Karen started laughing, a soft relaxed laugh, sounding every bit a woman. Sean was instantly infected by the soothing sound of her voice. Their tasks quickly became a competition, which Karen easily won. Retrieving the champagne bottle, Karen trickled champagne over her fingers, then wiped them off on the blanket. Sean did the same. As if they had rehearsed it, Karen and Sean simultaneously plucked a halved strawberry out of the plastic container and offered it to each other. They did it again. Karen added a sip of champagne to their mimed game. Sean raised his hand, as if to press pause. He then felt around in the tote bag, held up a plastic container, opened it, snatched up a strawberry and dabbed it in the container.

"Here, try this," Sean suggested, and offered Karen the strawberry.

Karen asked cautiously, "What's that white stuff on it?"

Sean replied proudly, "Superfine sugar laced with natural crystalline vanillin."

Hesitating, Karen replied, "You go first."

Sean popped the strawberry into his mouth, chewed and swallowed it, made a hideous face, grabbed his throat, and fell back onto the blanket as if he were dead.

Grabbing the champagne, Karen snapped, "That was not funny," and began drizzling the champagne all over Sean's chest. Laughing, Sean stood up, gently wrestled the bottle away from Karen, and returned the favor, which started them both laughing.

"Shhh, not so loud," Karen cautioned as she stood up, a mischievous smile on her face. She then reached down, gathered up fistfuls of her caftan, pulled it up over her head, nonchalantly dropped it onto the blanket, and stood naked in the moonlight.

Strawberry Moon

Smiling, following her cue, Sean discarded his shirt and stepped out of his pants and briefs. They knelt down facing each other and almost in rehearsed unison began to tenderly explore each other's body with the soft tips of their fingers. Karen smiled when she saw Sean's response to her touch and leaned back, pulling him with her.

Sean halved her swollen flesh with his tongue.

Karen cried out ever-so-softly, then whispered, "Come in me.....now....please."

There was a sense of urgency thinning her words.

Sean responded.

Karen wrapped her legs around his waist, startling him with her strength, taking his breath away.

"Be still," she pleaded. "I want to feel your heart beating inside me." She guided Sean to where she wanted him and in a single graceful move, rolled him over onto his back and sat up, straddling him and gazing into the face of the moon as if in a trance.

Karen began moving her hips in small circles, squeezing him, as she gracefully rose up and down as if she were floating on a calm sea.

Karen suddenly screeched, "No!"

Startled, Sean opened his eyes to find the shadowy image of Karen with broad white feathered wings spread wide, silhouetted against the face of the full moon.

Karen whispered, "No. It is not his time. He has been falsely claimed. I will return in his place." Karen bent down, wrapped her wings around them.....no longer two but one.....touching each other to sleep as the Strawberry Moon fell to earth.

#

The first strokes of early morning light painted the sky awake with streaks of orange and pink. Standing, naked, their bodies bathed in the cool pre-dawn light, they embraced, feeling each other still warm from sleep. The distant choking of a tractor's engine startled them apart. They dressed quickly, laughing like truant school children.

As they slipped back into the wooded path, Karen whispered, "Thank you."

Confused, Sean asked, "For what?"

"You made me feel beautiful and young again. You asked for nothing, yet you gave me everything I demanded of you and more than what you thought you could."

Karen turned to go.

Strawberry Moon

Sean blocked her path.

"No!" she ordered, then pushed him aside and dissolved into the dark of dawn.

#

Strawberry Moon

CHAPTER 16

28 June

BODY FOUND

George Kraft

Staff Reporter

While plowing one of her fields yesterday morning, Catherine Greene, CPT USMC Retired, owner of Greene Farms in Red Hook, made a grisly discovery: the naked mutilated body of a man authorities say had been dead for only a 'few hours'.

Police Chief Peter Kratz reported that the cause of death is yet to be determined. However, reliable sources have told this reporter the man was found with his 'chest ripped open' and his 'heart ripped out and taken'.

The police reported the face and hands of the victim had been burned beyond recognition by some sort of chemical, forcing identification to be made using dental records and DNA. Which Chief Kratz noted 'could take weeks'.

Chief Kratz also stated: "At this point, we believe the body was brought to this location and the murder" (Chief Kratz believes this is a homicide) "took place elsewhere and the body was dumped in the field sometime just before dawn."

At this point the police have no leads, not even footprints around the body since investigators at the scene reported everything appeared to have been 'blown clean by a strong gust of wind'. However, when contacted by this reporter, three regional weather services advised there were no high winds detected in the immediate area and that in fact 'the air was calm due to a stationary column of high pressure air, which moved in late yesterday afternoon, accounting for the hot and muggy air in the valley'.

While Ms. Greene was requested by the police not to comment on what she found, she wanted the public to know: "I sincerely hope everyone will feel perfectly safe visiting our farm for the fresh vegetables, corn and fruit, when in season, we have become famous for in the Hudson Valley."

#

Strawberry Moon

Author's Notes

For readers who wish to learn more about numerology, goddess worship, ancient religions, the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the cycles of the moon, and the folklore found in my story, I suggest the below-noted resources. Which are but a few of the many texts I drew upon for Strawberry Moon.

Numerology
E. T. Bell, Ph.D.

The Mystery of Numbers
Anne Marie Schimmel

City of Dreadful Night
James Thomson

The Holy Bible
King James Version

The Oxford Companion to the Bible

The Oxford Classical Dictionary

The Encyclopedia of Religion

Plots and Characters in the Fiction and Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe
Robert L. Gale

Moon Tables for Times Past, Present and Future
Rolf Brahde

New and Full Moons - 1001 B.C. to A.D. 1651
Herman H. Goldstine

The Old Farmer's Almanac
1943 through 2018

The Women
Glen Yarbrough
The Lonely Things: The Love Songs of Rod McKuen
[\[https://bit.ly/2QUVySI\]](https://bit.ly/2QUVySI)

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