

PreView

Avatar Resurrection!

Book I

The Novel

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WordShop Publications
[www.donaldbeman.com]
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#

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!* Book I is an autobiographical novel, a work of literary fiction. Names, characters, places and events described, referenced or portrayed in *Avatar Resurrection!* Book I are the product of my imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places and events is coincidental.

#

Chapter 1

ForeWord

The only light in the enormous showroom, easily half the size of a football field, was from the skylights two stories up. The air was still and musty, reminiscent of a gymnasium after a basketball game. Bronze, marble and metal Erector-Set sculptures cast eerie shadows onto the walls and hardwood floor. In the center of the exhibition was a monumental size bronze statue of a naked woman, easily twice Sean's six-foot height. Her arm was outstretched, holding something, which was blocked from Sean's view by the wings of a hideous part-bird, part-man and part-fiberglass fabrication.

Sean slowly, cautiously, inched his way toward the sculpture. "Holy shit!" he yelped and stumbled backwards, when he looked up and saw that the Herculean woman was holding the head of a man, his eyes bulging, his mouth cast open in a silent scream that echoed through Sean's mind. His long hair slithered through the fingers of the woman's large clenched fist and coiled up and around her forearm.

"Do you like it?" a woman asked, her voice deep, strong, yet gentle.

Sean spun around to find a shadowy figure cloaked in a black floor-length caftan.

"Forgive me, I did not mean to startle you, she said with a genuine hint of concern in her voice. She then slowly limped out of the shadow of the sculpture.

Sean asked somewhat hesitantly, "Mademoiselle Moriah?"

"Just Moriah. That is my name. My only name. That is who and what I am."

Moriah raised her hand and pointed to the sculpture. To Sean's surprise, Moriah's hand was easily twice the size of his hand. Her fingers thick and twisted, as if having been broken, never set, and left to heal that way. Beneath her loose-fitting caftan was a slight but noticeable hump on her back, twisting her body into a sideways shrug.

Moriah tapped the air with her finger. "What do you think of my work, Sean?"

#

Chapter 2

Academy of Fine Art Greenwich Village

Driven by a nor'easter the solid wall of rain succeeded in scrubbing the streets and sidewalks of lower Manhattan kitchen clean and accomplished in two hours what a battalion of broom pushers and motorized street sweepers would have needed a week to do. Those same schizophrenic April showers also succeeded in chasing Dr. Sean MacDonald in and out of doorways and ducking underneath flapping awnings, as he zig-zagged his way through Greenwich Village on his way to the Academy of Fine Art.

When the traffic light changed, Sean stood at the curb, staring down at a puddle, mesmerized by a candy wrapper trapped in a seemingly endless whirlpool of cigarette butts, plastic straws and styrofoam cups. When Sean asked himself for the umpteenth time, *Do you really want to do this?* his left brain immediately said, *You made a deal, MacDonald, you have no choice.* But his right brain told him to, *Go home and finish the final rewrite for your editor.* And to make things worse, something just didn't feel right and he had learned the hard way not to ignore his intuition. *It's your female side,* his therapist told him. *Listen to it. It's more you than you are willing to admit.*

Sean needed a moment or two to sort things out before it was too late. *Before you can't turn back.* Stepping away from the curb, he started arguing with himself, but his train of thought was quickly broken, when a dozen or so women bustled past on both sides of him, chattering in Mandarin, as they skirted the puddle and shuffled across the cobblestone street. Their unseen sandals, hidden by long silken pants, clicked and clacked over the blocks of shiny wet granite, calling up forgotten images of the rapid-fire slap of ivory tiles on mahogany tables from heated games of mahjongg, waged by half-naked aging women in the rooftop solarium of the private Jewish country club he spent four summers in high school, working and losing his boyhood virginity.

Pulling himself back to reality, Sean slipped the letter from Bradley Johnson out of his sport coat pocket to double-check and make sure he hadn't forgotten anything.

I'm looking for a series of in-depth articles focusing on two parallel themes: Moriah the sculptor; Moriah the woman the hottest classical sculptor today womanly synthesis of Michelangelo and Rodin labeled a fraud and a master copyist, by Allan Stern, who seems to have dropped off the face of the earth interview at Academy of Fine Art in the Village, 6:00 PM, Friday, 25 April, two hours before the annual members sculpture show based on Moriah's track record with critics, this assignment is not a slam-dunk fifty-fifty chance you get past the first interviewsince this type of writing is new to you, have the drafts on my desk after Labor Day, to give us enough time for probable rewrites.

"Probable rewrites? Thanks for the vote of confidence, Johnson!"

Pocketing the letter, Sean glanced at his watch. *Quarter to six.* He squared the Windsor knot of his tie, tried his gig line, buttoned his sports coat, then patted his

pants pockets with both hands. Hesitating, wondering why he did that, he quickly smiled when he remembered why: *Looking for a stick of gum, he thought, Juicy Fruit!*

#

Writing, and not as a hobby, was something Sean had always wanted to do, but lacked the courage to listen to his heart. To heed a timid voice inside him telling him to pack his bags the summer after high school and chase his dream. *I don't want to go to college, I want to go to Paris and write*, he naively told his father. It never happened: those things rarely do, when we ask instead of take. But that voice was never silenced.

Having been given the opportunity to teach the new graduate-level distance learning writing workshops, Sean was able to dust off the mental scripts he'd been writing, rewriting and filing away for years. His compulsive nature now had him up long before the sun crept over the horizon, sitting at the computer, while downing a dozen cups black coffee every morning. He stayed at it until early afternoon, when he went running in an effort to untie the knots he had twisted his brain into. His new virtual classroom schedule also allowed him time to take on freelance writing assignments.

#

Sean checked his watch again. *It's too late to back out of this now*, he told himself. *Just do what you agreed to do and it will be over before you know it.*

Hurdling the puddle at curbside, Sean darted into the street. The deafening blast of an air horn sent him scrambling to the safety of the NO PARKING TODAY signs lining the parking spots across the street. Sean spun around and started to raise his fist and 'flip the bird' at the driver in the truck barreling down the street. Instead, he just shook his head and slapped at the air. When turned around, he came face-to-face with a five-story brick building in the process of being sandblasted back to life. The Haverstraw bricks, once smooth as glass, were porous and pockmarked, their mortared seams begging to be re-pointed. The cast iron frieze over the converted storefront, recently sandblasted and stripped bare of decades of old paint and rust, was waiting for its new black iron coat. While the setting sun, slicing between the buildings behind him and casting his shadow across the sidewalk and up against the face of the building, added its restorative touch: firing the powdery brick to ancient cinnabar.

Stepping back, Sean scanned the old building from sidewalk to rooftop. After counting the truncated spikes in the spiked black-iron crown, Sean's always inquisitive gaze bounced down the face of the building, from window box to window box: yellow daffodils in some; lipstick-red tulips in others; and bursts of red and white impatiens.

Sean checked his watch again and smiled. *You're nervous, aren't you?*

He took aim at the door on his left, but promptly swerved to the right when he saw the words DELIVERIES ONLY stenciled onto the wood-planked door. He drummed his fingers over the words Academy of Fine Art gilded in foot-high letters on the inside of the blackened storefront window between the matching pair of deep-set entrance doorways. He tried the handle of the door to his right. It was locked. He knocked and waited. No one answered. He tried again, this time with his fist. Nothing. He looked for a doorbell. Not finding one, he jiggled the harp-shaped brass door handle just to double

check. Didn't budge. About to knock again, Sean was startled by the stuttering screech of tires behind him, a flashing red light bouncing off the building. He spun around.

A tow-headed young police officer burst out of the passenger side of the patrol car and demanded, "Where is she?" His partner sitting behind the wheel, an older man the size of a linebacker gone soft, was barking into a microphone buried in his hand.

Sean shook his head. "I'm not....."

The door behind him flew open. A woman screamed, "Keep your hands off me, you pervert!" then stumbled out onto the sidewalk. Pointing an accusing finger back into the empty doorway, she yelled, "It's him! I know it is! And I can prove it, too!"

The officer grabbed the woman's hands, pulled them behind her, and cuffed her.

A man, black, wiry, mid-fifties, wearing a three-piece suit, stepped out onto the sandstone doorway landing and calmly explained, "She was in the showroom this time, Rocky, and making a real fuss. I thought she was going to damage something. Or hurt herself. When I asked her to leave, she told me, '*go fuck yourself*'. When I tried guiding her out of the showroom, she started swinging and swearing like a drunken sailor."

The woman shouted, "I'm not going to stop until I see her. She knows where my husband is! So you might as well lock me up again and throw away the key this time."

The officer behind the wheel yelled, "C-mon, move it, Kelly!" The young officer gently guided the woman into the back seat of the patrol car, eased the door closed, then hopped into the passenger side of the police car. There was the hint of a wry smile on the woman's face as the car lurched forward, tires skipping and chirping over the rounded cobblestones as it made a sharp U-turn and sped away.

The black man stepped outside and asked politely, "You Doctor MacDonald?"

Sean nodded.

The man held out his hand. "George White," he said with a winning smile, his face relaxed, as if nothing had happened. "I wear two hats here. I teach sculpture and as you've just seen, I also play security guard. Our Director thinks people will listen to a black man, so I got 'volunteered' for the job."

George invited Sean inside with a gracious nod and sweep of his hand.

Stepping past George, Sean noted, "I got the impression she was here before."

George nodded, muttered, "At least a half-dozen times, maybe more." He then pulled the door shut, locked it, then scooted past Sean and took the lead. Sean followed George into a small lobby, the walls plastered with notices for concerts, pleas for rides home and a requisite number of adolescent protests about not wanting to grow up.

Sean smiled, enjoying the fleeting flashback into his own distant college past.

"Ever meet her?" George asked as he led Sean into a darkened hallway.

"Who?"

"Moriah."

"No."

George patted the top of his head. "Keep your head down. The pipes in here are low. Give you quite a goose egg and a nasty headache ... as I know only too well!"

Sean dutifully did what he was told and went a step further by covering his head with both hands just to be safe, since he was easily a head taller than George.

George asked, "Know much about her?"

"Only what my publisher told me. And what little I was able to read about her."

George laughed. "I hope they're paying you a lot for this."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"Ask me that again after you try to interview her. That's if she even shows up."

George's laugh settled down to an amused chortle.

Sean said with confidence, "But she's already agreed to the interviews?"

"Interviews ... as in more than one ... good luck!"

Before Sean could pin George down to what he meant by his response, they came to an abrupt stop at the end of the corridor and a galvanized steel door painted over with bright psychedelic colors. George pulled the door open and stepped aside.

"No lights inside. Just daylight from the overhead skylights. Watch your step and your head." George smiled. "Good luck, Doctor MacDonald."

Sean nodded, forced a smile, shook George's hand, then cautiously walked into the dimly lit exhibition hall, wondering, *What the hell did you get me into, Bradley?*

#

Chapter 3

Moriah?

The only light in the enormous showroom, easily half the size of a football field, was from the skylights two stories up. The air was still and musty, reminiscent of a gymnasium after a basketball game. Bronze, marble and metal Erector-Set sculptures cast eerie shadows onto the walls and hardwood floor. In the center of the exhibition was a monumental size bronze statue of a naked woman, easily twice Sean's six-foot height. Her arm was outstretched, holding something, which was blocked from Sean's view by the wings of a hideous part-bird, part-man and part-fiberglass fabrication.

Ducking down, Sean slowly, cautiously, inched his way toward the sculpture.

"Holy shit!" he yelped, when he looked up to see the Herculean woman was holding the head of a man, his eyes bulging, his mouth cast open in a silent scream that echoed through Sean's mind. His long hair slithered through the fingers of the woman's large clenched fist and coiled up and around her forearm.

"Like it?" a woman asked, her deep strong voice, confident, yet nonetheless feminine.

Sean spun around to find a shadowy figure cloaked in a black floor-length caftan.

"Forgive me, I did not mean to startle you, Doctor MacDonald" she said with a genuine hint of concern in her voice. She stepped out of the shadow of the sculpture.

Sean asked somewhat hesitantly, "Mademoiselle Moriah?"

"Just Moriah. That is my name. My only name. That is who and what I am."

Moriah raised her hand and pointed to the sculpture. To Sean's surprise, Moriah's hand was easily twice the size of his hand. Her fingers thick and twisted, as if having been broken, never set, and left to heal that way. Beneath her loose-fitting caftan was a slight but noticeable hump on her back, twisting her body into a sideways shrug.

Moriah tapped the air with her finger. "What do you think of my work?"

Sean replied without hesitation, without needing to think about what to say.

"I love it! And I also hate it at the same time. And I don't know why."

Moriah laughed, a deep throaty womanly laugh, and asked, "Love and hate? Can they be felt at the same time?"

Sean half-shrugged. "What I see makes me feel not think."

Moriah nodded ever-so-subtly. "Are you sure that it isn't fear that you feel? Fear of the fate that befell this wretched creature, a man like yourself."

Wretched creature like me? Sean wondered and reexamined the large detached head and headless body of the man lying at the woman's feet. He then reconsidered the woman. "I love it because it makes me feel without thinking. And I hate it for the same reason. It, she, and in reality you as the creator of this wonderfully powerful and provocative creative statement are far stronger than I am."

Hesitating, gazing at Sean, Moriah whispered softly, "Thank you."

She then slowly limped out of the shadow of the bronze, stopped an arm's length from Sean, and turned to face him. Moriah was much shorter than he first thought. Her eyes were a curious swirl of brilliant cerulean blue and midnight black. Her nostrils were

flared, her lips thick, but surprisingly nonetheless womanly. Her long auburn hair, soft and silky on his eyes, fell onto and shoulders and flared out down her back.

Partially spreading her arms, Moriah asked, "What do you see and feel now?" .

Holding his gaze fixed on Moriah's gaze, Sean stepped forward and held out his hand. "I'm honored to meet you and I'm looking forward to learning about your work." Sean paused, as if searching for the right words to express how he felt. "I simply ask that you be patient with me and my ignorance."

Moriah slipped her large knurled fingers around Sean's outstretched hand. Her touch was surprisingly gentle; but at the same time frighteningly powerful.

Out of habit, something men often do, Sean tightened his grip, only to feel his hand being swallowed up in hers. When he relaxed his hold on her, Moriah held firm, adding to his growing sense of insecurity. She then nodded, as if she felt something in his touch, smiled, gave Sean his hand back, and turned away to face the bronze.

"You're a writer, Doctor MacDonald, what do you know about sculpture?"

Wait, Sean thought, *I'm supposed to be interviewing you*. He just as quickly told himself, *Don't be a jerk, it's a fair question*.

"Only what I've seen and felt. I'm hoping you will continue my real education."

Moriah said with a smile in her voice, "Well said, Sean."

Quick, change the subject, Sean told himself.

"What in the world was that woman doing here?"

"What woman?"

"The woman the police took away. The one who was all bent out of shape about not being able to talk to someone."

Moriah replied with a casual shrug of her shoulders, "I did not see her. I only heard a woman arguing with George here in the showroom, when I was coming in through the service entrance. She seemed very unhappy about something."

Seeing that woman all over again in his mind's eye ... battered, bleeding, clothes torn, claiming George hit her ... Sean's anger nearly got the better of him. Gesturing to the bronze, he asked, "What did you title this work, it reminds me of....."

The bubble of distant voices startled Sean into lowering his hand and stepping back. He then squinted at his watch in the dark. "Damn! People are already starting to show up." He turned to Moriah, who he found watching him intently. Embarrassed, he asked, "Would you mind if we....."

"George will give you directions to my studio," she said without hesitation, as if she had read his thoughts. Moriah pointed menacingly at Sean. "But you are not to give them out to anyone. Not even your publisher. I will see you next Friday evening at eight. Please be on time ... time is very precious to me."

Moriah turned to leave, her exit slowed by a limp, leaving Sean juggling feelings of compassion, repulsion, awe, curiosity and affection, bordering on *Don't go there!* he told himself. And not because of what he thought; but what he felt, when he looked into Moriah's eyes. *I now know why you wanted me to do this series, Bradley. And it had nothing to do with what you told me, when you called and what you wrote in that half-assed letter. She wouldn't talk with you. She doesn't trust you. Smart woman.*

Two hours ago, Sean wasn't sure he wanted to take on this project: read up on the art and science of classical and contemporary sculpture; chase down and interview some eccentric sculptor; stroke her ego; learn about her work; and if he were lucky, write something meaningful about it all. But now, with unanswered questions swirling inside his mind ... and elusive images of Moriah's breathtaking sculpture fanning the flames of his always overactive imagination ... Sean knew there was no way in hell anyone could now tear him loose from this project.

He glanced up at the towering sculpture and laughed, "Unlike your head!"

When Sean rested his hand on the base of the bronze, he instantly snatched it back. Glancing down, he saw the fated man's tongue cast into the base of the bronze.

Sean quietly laughed to himself, then paraphrased Moriah, "A man just like me!"

#

Chapter 5

Pamela Eagleston
As You Like It

With the telephone receiver wedged into her neck, half-hidden by her shoulder-length orange hair ... straight as straw but smooth as silk and falling onto her shoulders ... the woman seated behind the reception desk in the makeshift lobby of the Academy of Fine Art looked up at Sean, raised her index finger and mouthed the words *One moment please*, then went back to writing down a lengthy message from whoever it was squawking at her.

Sean resumed counting the diamond studs in her right ear, in addition to a large diamond stud in her earlobe. On her left ear were six gold beads in descending order of size curling up her left ear. To this collection, he noted a tiny round-cut emerald stud in the left side of her nose. Recalling the photographs in the window of the body piercing shop he passed on the way to the Academy, which he had taken the time to stop and look at, Sean discretely lowered his gaze. While it might have been his overactive imagination, Sean was certain he could see a circular shadow the size of a quarter pushing up the delicate fabric of her snug-fitting turquoise sweater at the very end of her right breast and ever-so-slightly off center. The thought of having his own nipple pierced prompted Sean to wince and unconsciously cup his hand over his chest.

As if she read his thoughts, the orange-haired woman looked up and frowned.

Embarrassed, Sean turned away and began reading the posters on the walls around him. The name Allen Ginsburg, printed in bold black letters, jumped out at him. His first thought was, *Just like the old beatnik poet himself*, as he read an obviously outdated poster announcing a poetry reading at a local coffee house. Sean recalled the memorable opening words from *Howl ... I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness ...* Ginsburg's signature poem that rocked America in the fifties with its angry in-your-face *Fuck You!* declaration of his homosexuality.

"May I help you?" the woman asked, her authoritative voice pulling Sean back to reality and sanity. He turned and said with a relaxed smile leftover from his thoughts, "I have an appointment with George White."

The not-so-young woman sat up and drew her arms behind the back of the chair. "And you are?" she asked, tilting her head to one side.

With the sweater pulled taut over her breasts, Sean had all he could do to keep from staring. "Sean MacDonald."

The woman's sapphire-blue eyes sparkled, adding another touch of precious color to her portrait. "Oh! Yes. Doctor White is expecting you, Doctor MacDonald."

Glancing down, she pecked a button on the phone with one of her metallic-green fingernails. After a beep, she hit three more buttons in rapid-fire succession, entering some sort of code. She stood up, surprising Sean when she rose to his eye level.

"The machine will pick up now." Sounding more like an executive than a secretary, she asked, "You're the 'lucky one' doing the series on Moriah, right?"

"In person," Sean replied with a courteous half-bow at the waist.

She then asked in rapid-fire succession, "Briefcase, tape recorder, note pad?"

Sean replied playfully, "No, no, no."

Fighting back a smile, the woman nodded and stood looking at Sean.

"George is here, isn't he, Miss..."

"Eagleston," she said politely, just short of being cool. "Pamela Eagleston. And, yes, Doctor White is here." Pamela gestured for Sean to follow her as she started down the same hallway George had led him down the first time he was here. "We all do double duty, Doctor MacDonald. George plays security guard, when he's not teaching sculpture. Larry Anders, our art historian, on loan from Yale, handles the publicity for the Academy. Jeannette Brown, our ceramicist, takes care of maintenance. And Roberta Peterson keeps the books in order between her drawing classes."

Sean quipped, "And what's left for the Director to do?"

As if responding to the dubious tenor of Sean's question, Pamela said sweetly, but none the less seriously, "I assure you, Doctor MacDonald, Doctor Howard is kept quite busy wining and dining people with deep pockets and a love of art and artists."

Sean smiled. *Touché*. He then asked, "Is receptionist your first or second job?"

Pamela shook her head. "We've got a full-time secretary, thank goodness. Hilary had to go to the bank to make a deposit ... can't have checks bouncing ... so I'm covering for her. My usual part-time gig, when I'm not teaching painting, is modeling for the life study classes. Mostly for Roberta, but occasionally I fill in for George, when his regular model can't make it. However, she's here today, as you will soon see."

In the blink of an eye, Sean had Pamela's turquoise sweater and tailored black slacks peeled off her tall, trim but delightfully full womanly figure.

"I see," is all Sean could think of saying without getting himself in trouble.

Pamela said with a light-hearted laugh, "You might say that I challenge the students' creative imaginations." Before Sean could ask why that was, Pamela turned left and started up a steep flight of oak-stained stairs, two steps at a time. Sean had to do the same to keep up with her, only he didn't feel as graceful as Pamela looked.

"Challenge their imagination?" he finally asked. "How so?"

Reaching the landing for the second floor, Pamela turned around, hands planted on her hips, her colorfully painted fingernails drumming playfully over her pockets.

"Do I look like one of Fragonard's pink marshmallow ladies?"

Pamela locked onto Sean's gaze as if to keep him from checking to see.

Don't say it! flashed inside Sean's head like a traffic light, but he ignored the warning and drove right through. "You look pretty good to me," he said and instantly wished he heeded his own advice, when Pamela shook her head, a disapproving but at the same time amused smile fighting its way onto her face.

"So is it Doctor Eagleston?" Sean asked, trying to change the subject once again.

"Almost." Pamela started up the next flight of stairs, only now it was one step at a time. "I just completed the defense of my dissertation. The coronation is in August."

Sean never heard that expression before, but upon reflection decided it rang true, when he thought about how some of his former classmates acted once they were crowned with a Ph.D. "Fine art?" he asked, matching Pamela step for step.

"Art history. I'm what you might call a late bloomer. Like you, perhaps."

The barb of sorts caught Sean off guard as he asked in a high-pitched voice.

"Me!"

Pamela slowed her pace and patted Sean on the arm, her touch a pleasant surprise. "I took a break after graduate school ... ages ago! ... and traveled around Europe. I painted my way from Glasgow to Rome, stopping here and there to study with some of the best contemporary artists at places like the Academie des Beaux Arts in Paris. I even made the mistake of falling in love with a young French painter, and getting..." Pamela caught herself. "So that's why I'm just now getting my doctorate. But I'm sure you could easily tell, I'm not one of the 'traditional' students here."

Sean eyed Pamela in a whole new light, head to toe, and still didn't believe her.

"No, I couldn't tell," he said with a shake of his head. "As a matter of fact, I really did think you were one of the graduate students."

Pamela smiled. "It must have been my hair." She combed her fingers through her long pumpkin-colored mane. "And this." She tapped the emerald on her nose.

"Second childhood. One just didn't do this in Old Greenwich, when I was growing up. Especially not with my father."

Sean debated whether or not he should continue down this path of conversation.

Why not, he decided. "As a matter of fact, it wasn't your hair or your earrings, or whatever it is you call that emerald thing on your nose, it was you."

Pamela was quiet for a moment. "You're sweet."

"Sweet? Me? That is not something I can recall anyone ever saying about me."

Pamela laughed. "Should I put you to the test?"

Not wanting to hear what he thought she was going to say, Sean asked, "What did you mean a moment ago, when you said you were a late bloomer like me?"

Pamela said with a certain spunk, "I read your recent book."

Sean was caught off guard yet again. "Really?" he asked in a surprised, high-pitched squeaky voice, which only added to his growing sense of insecurity.

Pamela mimicked his response. "Yes! Really!"

"Enjoy it?" Sean asked, his voice under control but his reaction still unguarded.

Pamela stopped and leaned up against the wall, her hands locked onto the brass railing behind her. "Yes, I did, as a matter of fact. Very much so."

Pamela waited for Sean to stop and look at her.

"Mind if I ask the first-time author a few questions?"

Brace yourself, MacDonald, here it comes! "I suppose that comes with the price of admission." He slipped his hands into his back pockets. "Fire at will."

"Why did you make the Devil a woman?"

Sean's boyhood smile began creeping onto his face. "Did that bother you?"

Pamela asked, "Do you see all women as devils?" and continued up the stairs.

Sean caught up to Pamela. "I thought the answer there for the taking."

Pamela paused, as if sizing up Sean, then smiled and quipped, "Cute."

For the remaining two flights of stairs ... walked ever-so-slowly and side-by-side, without once looking at one another ... Sean and Pamela went back and forth: asking questions; tendering answers; some direct; others evasive; no subject off-limits; and occasionally stopping and qualifying what one or the other had said. On the top floor landing, the sunlight pouring down through the skylight overhead set Pamela's orange hair on fire. Pamela extended her hand and looked at Sean, slipping past his defenses and deep inside him before he could raise his guard.

Uncomfortable, Sean was about to look away, but stopped himself.

"Thank you, Ms. Eagleston," he said as he shook her hand.

"Please, Sean, call me Pamela."

Sean nodded and said in a studied voice, "Pamela."

Pamela then asked somewhat playfully, "Ever see a sculpture class at work?"

Sean shrugged. "Nope."

Pamela gestured to the arch-topped door beside her, which was slightly ajar.

"Then you're in for a treat."

Before Sean could say anything, ask what she meant ... something inside him made him want to hold onto her and not let her go ... Pamela walked to the head of the stairs, sat sidesaddle on the brass handrail and slid down the flight of stairs, laughing.

Sean watched her walk gracefully down the next flight of stairs and out of sight, as the muted sound of George White's voice called up Sean's thoughts of his first visit to the Academy: a rude reminder of what he had come here for. All he could think of was, *Let's see what this woman-beater is like with his students.*

Sean started for the door, but stepped back and shook his head. *This is no way to go into an interview*, he told himself. But try as he might, Sean was unable to put the images of that woman out of his mind: her face bloodied; clothes torn; hair twisted into knots. What etched the unsettling images even deeper into his psyche was George's apparent indifferent attitude, as if the woman was a thing. And George lying to the police only made Sean that much angrier, then upset with himself for feeling that way.

Sean growled under his breath, "Forget it. Let it go." and paused to calm down.

Like it or not, MacDonald, you need his help ... so make the best of it.

#

Chapter 7

Seven Cardinal Sins The Woman Touches the Earth and Creates Life

Sean heard George coming up the stairs, humming to himself, his deep voice resonating melodically in the cavernous stairwell. When he reached the landing outside the studio, George changed his tune, giving it a jazzy upbeat bounce as he glided into the loft, fingers snapping, in another world. When he looked up, he stumbled to a stop.

"What the hell!"

The previously shrouded sculptures had all been defrocked. Sean was sitting on the model's marble bench, his gaze bouncing back and forth between a cluster of photos spread out on the bench beside him and the row of figures surrounding him. Each of the figures was garbed in floor-length robes delicately shaped from clay. Braided ropes circled their waists, the frayed ends hanging down at their sides. Hoods were pulled up over the heads of three of them, but failed to hide the impressions of their hideous faces. The other four were bare-headed, their faces just as frightening.

Sean glanced at George, who appeared anything but pleased, and announced, "Look what I found!" He gestured to the sculptures with a sweep of his hand and waited for George to say something. Sean slapped the photographs down onto the open binder on the bench beside him, stood up, took aim at the first sculpture and went down the line, pausing at each figure only long enough to stab the air with his index finger and announce accusingly in rapid succession, "Lust. Gluttony. Greed. Sloth. Wrath. Envy. Pride." He turned to George. "It appears that we have a creative and masterful interpretation of the Seven Cardinal Sins, created by the gifted hands and heart of the sculptor known as Moriah. What do you think, Doctor White?"

Sean made it sound like he really didn't need or even care if he got an answer.

George stood staring at the ominous figures, then declared, "They're fucking fantastic, aren't they?" His gaze drifted slowly, admiringly, from one clay figure to the next. "When I saw the first one after she finished it, I couldn't help thinking I was looking at an early Rodin." George appeared to shiver. "The woman touches the earth and creates life. Only God has done that." In silence, with Sean watching, George set about carefully spraying down and covering the sculptures. His task completed, he sat on the marble bench and invited Sean to return and sit beside him.

"It will be ten years this August, Doctor MacDonald, when a misshapen, dwarf-like creature walked into my studio one morning ... hobbled is more like it ... her head down, her face hidden by an explosion of vibrant auburn hair so soft and silky that I was tempted to run my fingers through it to see if it was real." George's gaze was now somewhere off in the distance. "At first, I thought it was one of my students playing a joke on me." He shook his head. "Thankfully, I did not say anything. Moriah might have run away if I had. She was carrying something in a gunny sack. It was obviously heavy by the way the sack pulled at the handles. She asked me to 'look at something' and tell her 'honestly' what I thought of her work. When I saw her hand as she reached into that sack, I knew at that very moment she had to be in great physical pain."

George paused, gave up a subtle shiver, and went on with his story.

"She pulled a head out of the sack, raw clay, and my heart stopped. It was the head of Christ, unbearable pain sculpted into every crease and crevice of his face. The crown of thorns was so lifelike, so sharp ... the wounds so real ... that my head and heart hurt just looking at it. But his eyes were filled with love. It took my breath away. I almost cried. I probably would have, had she not slipped it back into the sack."

George looked at Sean.

"It was as if she knew, as if she had read my face, or my mind!"

Sean gave himself up to the continuation of George's spontaneous tale. As he listened, he tracked George's every gesture, leaned into his every soft-spoken word. He followed every twist and turn in what became a turbulent and heart-wrenching journey spanning ten years, but sounded and felt to him like ten lifetimes.

Curiously, George spoke of Moriah more as a stranger than a colleague, and never once as a friend. This left Sean confused at first, then skeptical when it began to sound scripted. Much to Sean's irritation, not once did George respond to any of his questions about how Moriah came to choose the subjects of her work, beginning with the Seven Deadly Sins, which George revealed Moriah had titled the Seven Cardinal Sins. When Sean asked to borrow the portfolio until his research and articles were completed, George refused. When Sean made the case that referencing the portfolio would assure comprehensive and positive reviews, George handed Sean the portfolio.

Sean found it odd that in spite of all George had to say, he never mentioned anything of substance about Moriah: her personal likes and dislikes; her training; who she worked with in her early years; how long she'd been sculpting; or even something simple, such as how old she was. After two hours of listening, other than knowing of George's devotion, his awe of her as an artist ... even his jealousy if Sean was reading him right ... he knew little more about Moriah the artist than he did two hours ago.

Sean now knew that it was Moriah he must talk with, therefore, what George had to say was no longer of interest to him. Making up an excuse for having to leave, Sean parted on friendly terms, with Moriah's portfolio safely tucked under his arm.

#

Whatever ambivalence Sean had harbored about this assignment, was now completely forgotten, except for one thing: his determination to know what happened to the woman the police took away, whose words he couldn't, or didn't want to, forget.

Who is she? Sean wondered as he crossed the street. *And why was she here?*

#

Chapter 8

Pamela Eagleston
'Twenty Dollars Please'

As the cab pulled away, Sean turned around to see his own reflection in the store front window, broken up by foot-high gilded letters for Vanderbilt Galleries. The window wrapped around the corner of the building and continued down the side street off West Broadway. He stepped up to the glass to straighten his tie, but stepped back, when he saw someone peering down at him from the other side, his face framed by the oversized letter V: bushy black eyebrows; full lips; dark vacuous eyes pasted onto a small oval face. His hair, boot black and shoulder length, was frizzy as if it had just been blown dry. A paunch was masterfully, but not completely, hidden by the vest and perfectly tailored jacket of his pin-stripe suit. His arms were drawn behind his back.

Sean muttered, "Nosferatu" and fought back a grin. "Count Orlok in person."

The man in the window smiled without parting his lips. He then looked up and over Sean's head, his gaze drifting out of focus.

He still hadn't moved by the time Sean walked to the corner and through the open unlocked door, which was unusual for an art gallery in SoHo. He began poking around, unconsciously mimicking the human manikin in the window, who was now discretely tracking his moves and nodding, as if recording what Sean stopped to look at.

"If you have any questions," the man said without moving, "just ask."

Sean replied as 'matter-of-fact' as he could, "I'm looking for something by an artist named Moriah." He paused, telling himself, *Make it good*. "I don't know his first name. I read something about him in some art magazine in my doctor's waiting room."

As if a coin had been dropped into an unseen slot on his back, the man in the window came to life. He turned, wearing a new mask, smiling warmly. He was in front of Sean in three graceful strides, rubbing his hands as if to warm them up before touching Sean. "Seymour Vanderbilt," he said, offering Sean his hand. "Call me Skip."

Skip? You can't be serious.

Uneasy, Sean hesitated. *Go incognito*, he thought. *Lie*. "Bruce Peters."

"I presume this would be your first Moriah?"

"I want something to balance my other pieces."

Skip clasped his hands, held a prayerful pose for a moment, then said "I see." He then motioned toward the rear of the showroom. "Mademoiselle Moriah's work is in the back, Mr. Peters. In one of our private viewing rooms for our special clients. We only have one piece. However, I must warn you, her work is not for the faint-hearted."

Skip closed the front door, checked to make certain it was locked, then turned to face Sean. "Why don't you come with me," he suggested and briskly led the way, without waiting to see if Sean would follow. "I think you will be pleasantly surprised."

#

The room was dark, the ceiling beyond reach. There were no windows, just a skylight overhead; but it was painted over black. What little light there was crept in

from the dimly lit hallway. The walls were gray and had the look of being covered with a fabric. Heavy oak benches without backs were pushed against the walls. Faux marble columns stood on either side of the archway just inside the door. In the center of the room was a larger-than-life sized bronze figure of a man. He was Herculean, head thrown back, looking up, his powerful arms outstretched, hands bursting open.

"What do you do, Mr. Peters?" Skip asked as he reached for a row of small round dials on the wall beside the doorway.

Why don't you just ask me how much money I have in the bank, before you waste too much of your valuable time?

Sean noted matter-of-factly, "I retired three years ago."

Skip's reply was laced with envy. "Nice gig if you can get."

Gig? Must be the in word. Sean smiled. *Thank you Cab Callaway.*

Sean shrugged. "It has its good points and bad."

Skip tapped one of the dimmer switches and began dialing up a solitary spotlight hidden in the ceiling directly over the sculpture. The beam of clean white light rippled down over the muscles in the shoulders, arms, back and buttocks of the bronze god. His body appeared to flex with each twist of the dimmer, raising the level of light.

"Ready for an experience you'll never forget, Mr. Peters?"

Sean circled the room close to the wall, enjoying every intimate detail, every muscle in the metal, surprisingly soft, sensuous, alive, more like flesh than bronze.

"Holy shit!" he gasped, when he stepped in front of the statue. The man's face was raked with light and burning with pain, his mouth was half-twisted open in agony. His chest and belly had been gored open. Flesh hung loose, tethered to bone by sinewy strands of tendons. His genitals had been brutally clawed, as by a wild beast.

Sean whispered, "I don't fucking believe it!"

Beaming, skip asked, "Fantastic, isn't it?" sounding perversely delighted with Sean's response. "It's titled Man's Fate. It's inspired by....."

Sean whispered, "Andre Malraux."

"How did you know?"

Sean replied with a subtle sarcastic twist to his words, "Lucky guess," as he inched closer. When he did, Skip moved back and off to one side, as if refusing to walk around and face the bronze. Recalling Moriah's Seven Cardinal Sins, Sean glanced down and saw that the feet were not as finely detailed as the rest of the body: it was as if they were morphing up into clay. He found it curious and made a mental note to ask Moriah about it when he met with her. He then slowly raised his head, his gaze feeling its way up the viciously mauled body: once a god, now mortal, forever cast in time.

Knowing the literary works of Malraux all too well, certain there had to be more to the metaphor, Sean tipped up onto his toes, but still wasn't tall enough to see what he was looking for. Before Skip could object, Sean dragged a wooden bench away from the wall and set it directly in front of the bronze. He nodded at Skip, as if to assure him he would be all right, then kicked off his loafers and stepped up onto the bench.

"I thought so," he said, peering into the mouth of the man.

"What is it?" Skip asked, pushing himself off the wall and moving closer, but still stopping well short of confronting Moriah's powerful and frightening creation.

"His tongue has been ripped out." Sean laughed. "Not cut out, but crudely ripped from his mouth." Sean hopped down. "See for yourself."

His eyes wide open, Skip shook his head. "I'll take your word for it."

Sean pushed the bench back. While Skip played with the bench to get just so, Sean circled the bronze again. He then went around once more, this time within arm's length, feeling the open wounds with the soft tips of his fingers. He smiled to himself, realizing he expected it to be warm, only to feel the cold metal. Out of the corner of his eye, Sean saw Skip watching him, tracking him; predator and would-be prey.

Sean stepped back. "How much are you asking for it?"

Skip said with ease, "Two-fifty," making it sound like two-dollars and fifty cents.

Sean hid a smile and asked, "One-off?"

Skip sounded indignant when he replied, "Of course."

Sean gave in and looked at him.

"And the pattern?" he asked, pursing his face into a doubtful frown. "Destroyed?"

"It's a lost wax casting. There is no pattern."

Sean debated taking Skip to task, but instead asked, "Is the foundry on the east or west coast?" He nodded and thought, *Thank you, Bruce, for all you taught me.*

Skip fielded Sean's question by letting it go unanswered.

"Where shall I have it shipped?" Skip asked, walking to the doorway and turning off the light. "At our expense of course."

Sean's immediate thought was, *You cocky son-of-a-bitch*, and was tempted to say just that, simply to see Skip's reaction. He instead confronted Skip.

"I want to meet the artist first. And I want to see his studio."

Skip folded his arms into a knot over his chest. His small pot belly pushing out through his open suit coat, straining the buttons on his vest. "*Her* studio," Skip replied in a condescending *you don't know jack-shit* tone of voice. "Not possible. She doesn't allow it." Skip thread his arms tighter. "I haven't seen it and I don't think anyone has."

Sean strode across the darkened room and out into the hall. He started for the main showroom and said without looking back, "You want a quarter of a million dollars from me for a work by some unknown woman artist and I can't even see her studio?" He laughed out loud. "I said I was retired, Mr. Vanderbilt. Not brain dead." Upon saying that, Sean thought, *This is fun*, as he sauntered out into the front gallery.

Skip hurried to catch up. "Where can I reach you?"

Nice try, Sean thought.

"I'll call you. When I do, just tell me where to go and when I have to be there."

"But....."

"No buts!" Sean snapped. "In the meantime, let me have a transparency of the piece to take with me. I want to see how I feel about it in the morning."

Skip shook his head. "Sorry, no can do. The artist will not allow her work to be photographed by anyone. It's part of the representation agreement. That's one of the reasons I keep it in the back room. If she finds out someone has photographed....."

A woman's voice squawked, "Mr. Vanderbilt, line one, it's Mr. Hunt."

Richard Hunt? Sean thought and turned, looking for the source of the sound.

Skip was glowering at a phone on the wall near the hallway entrance.

"Not now," he growled. "I'm with a client. Tell him I will call him back."

There was a crisp electronic click. Before Skip could say anything, even take a step, the invisible woman's voice was in the air again. "I think you should take the call."

Skip hesitated, his anxious gaze fixed on Sean, his body leaning in another direction. "Call me tomorrow, Mr. Peters. After three." He turned and started toward a flight of stairs in the far back corner of the gallery. Halfway there, he stopped and turned back, a scowl on his face. "You are serious, Mr. Peters, aren't you?"

Make it good, Sean told himself. "I beg your pardon!"

#

Sean hopped out of the cab and darted up the exit ramp for the indoor parking garage for the MET, asking himself, *I wonder if I can get back in time to go running before dark?* Ignoring the fact that he had a suit on, Sean started running. A woman getting out of a Volvo station wagon squealed, clutched her purse, jumped back into her car and locked the door. Sean stopped, bent down, smiled and said, "Sorry!"

The wide-eyed woman nervously nodded, half-smiled, but wouldn't budge.

Sean began walking away but found it impossible to just walk, so he started jogging, which is when he realized he was wound up tight as a spring. Before he could ask himself why, he knew why and muttered, "He was right. You won't ever forget it."

The sound of tires squealing behind him, his head filled with thoughts of the woman he'd frightened, now trying to run him down, sent Sean racing toward the sidewalk in front of the elevator doors. Another screech a few feet behind him was followed by the sound of a newly familiar voice asking, "Doctor MacDonald?"

Sean turned to see Pamela Eagleston sitting behind the wood-rimmed steering wheel of a classic Ferrari roadster in concours condition, the rag top folded down, her shoulder-length orange hair wind blown into knotted cotton candy.

Sean smiled and asked playfully, "Are you following me?"

"No fair," Pamela laughed. "That's my question. And ladies first."

Pleased at seeing her, unable to keep from showing it, Sean asked, sounding jealous, "Where did you get this fantastic 365 GTB?" With his hands behind his back, Sean slowly circled the classic Ferrari roadster and came back to the driver's side.

"Nineteen sixty-seven?"

Pamela said with smile, "I'm impressed." She then patted the empty bucket seat beside her. "Hop in. I'll take you for a spin after I check with security to find out who parked in my reserved spot. I'll forgive whoever it is ... this time! ... but only because they're driving a sixty-five Austin Healy 3000 in what appears to be mint condition."

Pamela laughed and said playfully, "Twenty bucks says that he's short, fat and bald."

"I'll take that bet," Sean quipped, then scurried around the car and hopped in.

"You're on," Pamela replied and shook Sean's hand to close the deal.

The smell of saddle soap, old leather and the delicious scent of Pamela's perfume filled Sean's head. He discretely leaned closer to Pamela and took a secretive sniff.

"Shalimar?" he asked.

"A girl's got no secrets with you." She then asked, "Where's your car parked?"

"In your parking spot." Sean held out his hand. "Twenty dollars please."

#

Chapter 10

You're right, George.
The Weathervane Looks Like a Gargoyle.

Sean was late for his meeting with Moriah. Upset with himself for getting lost, he angrily hit the brakes, skidded to a stop along the side of the narrow country road, and sat staring up into the night sky, a mottled blanket of gray and indigo blue, stained with a cool yellow glow from the early rising full moon. "You probably drove right past it."

Downshifting, Sean hung a sharp U-turn and raced back up the hill behind him. At the top, he pulled over and rolled to a stop on the gravel shoulder. With a poke of his finger, he killed the lights, leaned over the wood-rimmed steering wheel and sat staring down into the valley: a patchwork quilt of fenced-in pastures, braided rows of recently-tilled earth and waves of winter wheat drowning in a pool of moonlight.

"That must be it!" he laughed and pointed to a patch of weathered shingles hiding amidst an oasis of overgrown trees. "Just past that abandoned fieldstone silo."

Pulling on the lights, Sean spun around and started back down the steep winding road. When the car leveled off with a thump, he dropped it down into second and accelerated down the dirt and gravel road, kicking up a tunnel of dust behind him.

Seeing what looked like an entrance, he slowed, pulled off the road, slipped between the pair of falling down split rail fences and abruptly sank into the dense corn grass up to the door handles. The submerged headlights dimmed to a murky splash of incandescent yellow as the exhaust quieted down to a watery gurgle in the dense grass.

Unable to see clearly, Sean took a chance, killed the lights and slowed to a crawl, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the soft moonlight.

"That's it! You're right, George," Sean whispered. "The weathervane does look like a gargoyle." Sean checked his watch. "Great start, MacDonald. You're an hour late!"

#

Chapter 11

Moriah Spun Around Her Eyes Ablaze, Incinerating Sean's Every Thought

With tote bag in hand, Sean walked up and stopped just short of the moonlight shadow cast by what Sean decided had been a horse barn in its former life. Not a single thread of light could be seen leaking out around the double-wide sliding barn door, the Dutch door cut into the center of the barn door, or the hay loft door overhead.

Knowing all too well what old barns were like ... aging skeletons of weathered wood miraculously resisting the winds of time ... Sean stood searching for the tiniest sliver of light knifing through cracks around any of the doors or overhead hayloft.

Giving up, he knocked on the door, scrapping his knuckles on the splintered wood. He waited. No response. He pounded on the door with the heel of his fist and was startled by a voice behind him that said softly, "It's not locked."

Spinning around, Sean saw the shadow of what appeared to be a woman standing a few feet away from him.

Speaking in a soft voice, Moriah said, "Good evening, Doctor MacDonald," then gracefully, silently, glided past him, pushed open the door and disappeared inside.

"Coming?" she called back. "Or do you prefer to stay and howl at the moon?"

Laughing at himself, his gaze cast down to see where he was going, Sean stepped inside and turned to shut the door, only to watch it silently close by itself and latch shut with the help of a pair of heavy-duty coil springs. He also noticed the trim around all of the doors, which explained why no light had leaked out of the barn.

Turning around, his eyes having adjusted to the soft light inside the barn, Sean expected to find Moriah waiting to reprimand him for being late. Instead, he saw a small cloaked figure standing in front of a man-sized mound of clay in the far left corner of the dimly lit horse barn-turned-studio. Sections of rusted angle iron, the armature supporting the clay, protruded from the torso where arms and a head should be.

#

The studio was the size of a banquet hall. Running lengthwise down the center was a row of boxed-in columns rising up and through the ceiling, supporting the ridge beam. Smooth-sawn planks matching those covering the entrance doors also covered the walls and ceiling overhead. Glancing around the room, Sean noticed that a fence-like wall, easily eight feet high, had been erected down one side, with three doorless openings to what he guessed was once a row of no longer used horse stalls.

A dozen shrouded sculptures, apparently in various stages of creation and size, were placed around the studio beneath a cluster of overhead spotlights. One undraped and yet to be patinated sculpture caught Sean's attention: the bronze head of a man, the size of a gorilla and just as ugly, atop a metal pedestal pushed into a far corner.

#

Sean started toward Moriah. "Please forgive me. I got lost! I misunderstood..."

Moriah raised her hand, ending Sean's contrition. "George told me the directions he gave you. I'm surprised you found me at all, especially at night and in the middle of nowhere." Moriah waved for Sean to follow her. "I hope you don't mind if I work while we talk." She abruptly stopped and patted a headless clay figure, as if it were alive. "I started this yesterday morning and haven't been able to walk away from it since."

Sean held up the tote bag. "I've got wine, cheese and a few fresh baguettes."

As if she hadn't heard him, Moriah stepped back from the sculpture and stood eyeing her work. The sleeves of her shiny black silk smock were rolled up past her elbows and snugged tight, exposing her muscular her forearms and biceps. Her equally powerful-looking hands were covered with a slimy pewter-gray film. A dozen or so narrow-beam spotlights mounted overhead illuminated the clay figure from all sides.

Sean reached into the sack and withdrew the bottle of white burgundy.

Moriah gestured to the opposite side of the studio. "You'll find a small kitchen in the double stall on the end. There's a fridge there with ice if you want to chill the wine. You can also whatever else you might need in the cupboards ... just help yourself."

Sean nodded and started across the studio, trying to reconcile his initial visual impressions of Moriah in the showroom at the Academy ... strong, brutish, almost more masculine than feminine ... with the womanly and sensuous way about her now.

#

As Sean walked up behind Moriah, she gestured to a table-sized cube of black marble pushed up against the wall. "Put the glasses and the bottle of wine there, Sean. Then come tell me what you think of my new work."

After doing what he was told, Sean walked up behind Moriah. To her left was a small aluminum folding ladder, four steps high. Beside it was a pedestal, no doubt secreted away from the Academy, topped with a large round object the size of a head and covered with a large wetted bath towel-like cloth. Off to her right was another pedestal, with an assortment of wood-handled sculpting tools. Nearby, a low table-like wooden palette with dolly wheels was loaded with a wheelbarrow-size mound of clay that looked like something that had been eaten then regurgitated by some huge beast.

Sean watched in silent awe as Moriah literally made something out of nothing with her large hands, giving form to the amorphous lumps of clay she scratched out of the mound beside her and added to her work. When she didn't stop, but kept working, Sean inched closer until he was directly behind and over her so he could see better.

The heat rising from her body warmed his face. Her earthy scent, the pungent odor of sweat and something he couldn't place, but recognized it, filled his head. Sean leaned closer and quietly breathed in.

"I don't think that's wise, Sean."

Startled, embarrassed, Sean stepped back. "I ... I shouldn't have. I just wanted to....." Moriah raised her hand, ending his confession. She then shrugged her shoulders and slowly rolled her head around, as if she were stretching the knots out of her neck.

"What did you think of Man's Fate?" she asked.

How did you know I saw that piece? rang inside Sean's head like an alarm.

Unsettled at being outed, Sean said without thinking, "I'm sure Malraux would approve wholeheartedly."

"Andre is dead. I want to know what you think."

Without waiting for Sean to reply, Moriah continued working the clay in silence, slowly creating the crude form of a man's chest. Sean thought that if he looked away, even for a moment, he would miss something. So he stood there in silence, inhaling the scent of raw clay and Moriah's now sweat-soaked body, filling his lungs, his head, his thoughts slowly escaping him, becoming elusive, replaced by feelings. Sean suddenly backed away, when he realized that he was growing aroused. Embarrassed by his uncontrolled reaction, Sean turned and walked over to the massive cube of stone.

"Care for a glass of wine?"

Moriah simply nodded.

The cork came out with ease, giving rise to Sean's fear the wine might have turned. He sniffed, then held the bottle up to the light to check for color and sediment. That's when he saw something out of the corner of his eye he hadn't noticed before. He turned and peered across the studio, to see a larger-than-life-sized figure of a tall dark-skinned woman, partially clad, flanked by a pair of equally over-sized winged creatures.

It's your imagination, he thought, refusing to believe what he saw.

Turning back, Sean poured each glass half-full, reconsidered, topped up the glasses, and stepped beside Moriah.

"Would you please tell me what the inspiration was for the Seven Cardinal Sins, I saw at the Academy in George's studio?"

Moriah wiped her hand on the leg of her silk slacks, then accepted the glass of wine. The crystal goblet looked like a child's playhouse toy in the hand of an adult. Moriah drained the glass in a slow single breathless sip and handed it back to Sean. He promptly refilled the glass and placed it into her waiting hand.

"My sins?" Moriah asked. "No one was supposed to see them."

Sean reclaimed his best altar boy voice. "I didn't know they weren't to be seen."

Moriah laughed, a warm robust laugh that sounded like she didn't believe a word he said, but at the same time liked what she heard. Moriah again downed the wine in a single breathless swallow and handed the glass off to Sean. He refilled it yet again.

Sean asked again, prodding her, "And the Seven Cardinal Sins?"

Moriah hesitated, then said somewhat somberly, "They were for an old client."

She turned around to face Sean. The converging beams of overhead lights cut deep into her face, exposing every twist and turn of her flesh from the hands of time and pain. Her gaze seemed to devour the light, taking away the glare, then settled on Sean. He thought he could feel her slipping inside him, as if searching for his unspoken thoughts. In an effort to break free, Sean asked, "Where do you find your inspiration, the 'creative sparks', so to speak, for your work?"

"I don't find them, Sean. They find me. Perhaps not unlike where and how you find the creative sparks for your writing." Moriah then said with an angry bite to her words, "And dreams, which rip me from my sleep!" Setting the glass down, Moriah grabbed a handful of clay off the palette and slammed it into the gut of the figure with such force the clay form appeared to rock backward. "They are there, every night, waiting for me. I feel like I haven't slept in ages." She punched the clay with her fist.

The wine appeared to be catching up with Moriah. She was flush and beginning to sweat. Her silk smock dissolved into her moist skin, clinging to her, revealing the sharp ridge of her hunch and beaded line of her crooked spine. Sean was filled feelings of repulsion mixed with compassion, tempered by a steadily rising attraction to her.

Moriah was now working the clay with a passion, giving manhood to the figure with such skill it fanned the flames of Sean's kaleidoscopic imagination that much more.

"How long does it take you to finish a piece ... start to finish?"

"A lifetime," Moriah replied with a sigh. She then added with a sense of disgust, "But I suppose that's not what Mister Johnson's readers want to hear from you, is it?"

Moriah forced a laugh. "Perhaps I should quote our mutual friend, Malraux." Closing her eyes, Moriah shook her head. "No, poor, dear Albert would be a far better man to steal from. He possessed a deeper sense of pathos than Andre ever did."

Poor dear Albert? Sean asked himself in disbelief. *The man died over fifty years ago. You're too young to have known him.* Sean searched for something Moriah had said to him that would reveal her age, since her body and face masked time so well.

Moriah arched her crooked back into a grotesque stretch, let out a sigh laced with pain, and returned to carving sinewy muscles into the figure's massive thighs.

"Then again, it all moves quickly," she said. "Like this one. But this isn't one of those," she added and gestured blindly with her hand.

Sean followed her erratic point until he realized she might be referring to the works that came out of her dreams or nightmares. As he turned back, the mysterious figure in the far corner of the studio caught his eye again. Hard as he tried, Sean still couldn't see it clearly enough to be certain what it was.

Moriah plucked a knife-like trowel off the pedestal beside her and began carving out the outlines of the shoulders and neck of her creation. "I never know what I will find buried in the clay, until I stick my hands into it and feel a heart beat. A soul."

Without warning, Moriah drove the trowel deep into the chest of the figure.

"No!" Sean gasped without thinking and covered his chest with his hands.

Moriah laughed, as if she knew what she was doing and got the reaction she wanted. She then stood perfectly still, arms at her sides, head back, staring up at the ceiling as if in a trance. Her shoulders rose and fell with each labored breath, inviting Sean to listen to see if she were alright. When it was apparent she wasn't, and wasn't about to say anything, Sean walked over beside her and knelt down to pick up her empty glass, intent upon refilling it for her. He felt Moriah's warm moist open hand on his neck. He hesitated, letting her soothing touch seep into his body. When he tried to stand, she kept him on bended knee, the strength of her touch like a cast iron yoke.

Sean was suddenly frightened. To hide his fear, he bowed his head in mock supplication. Moriah affectionately patted and rubbed his neck, her touch gentle and soothing. With a tap of her hand, she freed him to stand up.

Sean asked, "What was the title of the piece I saw at the Academy?"

Moriah turned away from Sean's inquiring gaze and began working the clay around the wound she made in the chest, healing it. Sean was about to ask another question, when Moriah began to strip youth away from the clay and replace it with age, withering the muscles with the tips of her fingers. Sean was rendered speechless.

"It's untitled," Moriah finally said in a half-whisper. "For now at least."

"Is that because of what happened with Anderson Galleries?"

Moriah spun around, her eyes ablaze, incinerating Sean's every thought, and said through clenched teeth, "No!" then returned to working the clay.

Unlike her sudden response, her moves were now slow, selective, her touch even more delicate than before. In self-imposed silence, Moriah worked and reworked the shiny gray surface, giving and taking away life. Sean watched her move about, bend and reach and turn and stand. The thin silk clung to her wet skin, let go, then grabbed hold somewhere else. Her moves were no longer awkward, but graceful, sensuous. He again felt himself growing aroused. He tried shaking loose the images in his mind, but couldn't free himself of them. Or the visceral feelings, which were now luring him deeper into a bizarre world of unfamiliar sexual fantasy. Unable to resist any longer, Sean gave in and imagined removing Moriah's sweat-soaked clothes with a brush of his hand. He began feeling every twist and turn of her deformed body, as he grew more aroused with every imagined touch: her womanly breasts; her large brown nipples; and tasting the scent of the bittersweet fragrance he couldn't get out of his mind.

In a desperate attempt to free himself, Sean stood in front of a life-sized nude male figure and lowered his gaze, expecting to be set free by the sight of a man, only to realize that he was no longer in control of his own fantasy. He spun away, searching for Moriah. He found her, feverishly working the clay, as if she, too, were caught in the same trance. Nearly out of control, dripping with passion, Sean started back toward her, but stopped at the sound of metal grating against metal behind him.

When the noise repeated itself, he turned and followed the faint sounds to the opposite end of the studio, close to the statue he noticed earlier but hadn't been able to make out clearly. He could now see a painted bronze statue of a woman, as tall as a man. Her hands reaching out, as if inviting him to her. Her skin was olive brown, her hair auburn. A sari, the color of heaven on a summer night, was draped over her shoulder, covering only one breast and wrapped loosely around her waist. The fabric fell to the top of her bare feet. Her toenails were painted a rainbow of precious colors. She had the look of a warrior, yet at the same time was soft, feminine and seductive.

Flanking her, somehow suspended in mid-air, was a pair of grotesque winged creatures, part-woman, part-feral beast. Sean inched forward for a closer look. Her eyes, painted sea green and just as deep, grew brighter as he drew nearer. A bitter cold suddenly knifed deep into his chest, taking his breath away. He winced, shrugged it off, and risked taking another step closer.

"No!" Moriah screamed in a shrill voice. "Stop! Back-up! Get away!"

Startled, Sean jumped and stumbled backward, his breathing now labored.

"You must go now!" she ordered.

Sean took one last lingering look at the striking bronze, forever capturing its image in his mind, and started back across the studio. He quickly realized that he, like Moriah, was soaking wet: his short-sleeve madras shirt clung to his back and chest; his tan cotton slacks were stained from perspiration and spotted two shades darker in his groin. He brushed at the spots as if they could somehow be made to disappear, only to be surprised by their all-too-familiar soapy feel. He brought his fingers to his nose and confirmed what his body told him. Confused and embarrassed at the realization of what had happened, Sean glanced up to see Moriah slipping the shroud off the object on the pedestal beside the bronze, revealing the faceless head of a man. Tossing aside the

fabric, Moriah grasped the unfinished head, lifted it off the pedestal and slowly climbed the small ladder. She moved as if she were dead tired. She paused to steady herself.

Racing to her side, Sean braced his leg against the ladder and firmly grasped Moriah's thighs, steadying her. Glancing down, Moriah smiled warmly, which surprised him. She then turned back and mounted the top step. Unsure if he should, Sean placed his hands on her hips. Leaning into his grasp, Moriah braced herself, raised the heavy clay head and jammed it down onto the steel spine jutting out of the neck of the figure.

Moriah then slumped back and fell into Sean's arms. His legs buckled under her weight. He dropped to one knee, but managed to hold her in his embrace and keep her from falling to the floor. Taking a deep breath, steadying himself, Sean guided Moriah to the floor, then tried to stand, but eased down onto his knees. Moriah offered Sean her hand. He took it. To his surprise, she helped him stand, then kissed his cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered, then gestured toward the entrance door.

"Let me see you out."

Sean pleaded, "But we haven't....."

Moriah raised her hand, commanding his silence.

"There will be many other times."

Sean asked, "May I call and....."

"I have no phone. George will let you know when I'm ready to see you again."

Speaking as calmly as he could, Sean suggested, "Why don't we just agree to meet once a week. Your studio is as good a place as any, if that's all right with you?"

Moriah hesitated, appeared to be considering Sean's suggestion, then nodded.

"That will work for me. But seven, not eight." She smiled. "And on time."

#

A few steps outside, Moriah began shivering. Out of habit, and fostered by what he suddenly realized was his sincere caring for her, Sean slipped his arm around her and drew her close to keep her warm. Moriah stopped and stood still, as if welcoming his touch. She then turned, limped back into the barn and locked the door behind her.

Sean stood staring out across the tall willowy grass, glistening with early morning dew. Snapshots of what he saw inside Moriah's studio, and her home, slowly replayed in his mind. A rising breeze stirred the air, chilling him with its cool pre-dawn breath. The creak of metal gave him a start. Anxious, Sean spun around and looked up to find the weather vane slowly turning back and forth, as if searching for the morning sun.

Sean started ambling back his car, tired, sore, and trying to sort out everything he witnessed. And to.....

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