

# STRAWBERRY MOON



**DONALD KNIGHT BEMAN**

STRAWBERRY MOON

## **PreView**

(2020)

# STRAWBERRY MOON

The Novel

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PreView

# STRAWBERRY MOON

## 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.*

"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.

# STRAWBERRY MOON

## **Disclaimer**

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

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### Author's Notes

# STRAWBERRY MOON

## I

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?

Will they pay you two salaries for wearing two hats and make the pay retroactive, since you've been doing both jobs for over a year?

You asked me to share with you the 'real' reason I decided to resign effective the end of the Spring term. The reason I originally gave you - I wanted to write. And it's not a spur-of-the-moment thing; I've been toying with it for years.

I will be renting out my house (mortgage paid off). The rental income will cover the rent and utilities for my apartment and all of my personal needs. And 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, and I hope to start dating.

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

Affectionately,

Sean.....

# #

# STRAWBERRY MOON

## II

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 and bone dry air flooded the kitchen as a pair of crows began 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 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, 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, 1991, and began 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, 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.....

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*.....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 and raw and bleeding.*

*Hands were reaching out behind him, gently tugging him, trying to lift him up. His sleeve caught on her splintered 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 re-opened the almanac and began turning the pages. Something blew out. Sean snatched it in mid-air. It was a sheet of old parchment paper with writing on one side, meticulously penned in faded blood-red ink, as if by a scribe centuries ago.....

**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.**

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*Life divided by that persistent three,  
LXX divided by 333 =  
.210210210210210210 ad infinitum.*

"God damn you to hell! It's me you want. Why did you take her? And my 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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## III

28 April

*"A Dream Within a Dream"*

Facing west across the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains, Merrywood Hall, on the campus of Hart College, was the epitome of an English country manor house reborn in the New World a century-and-a-half ago. But its once rugged limestone face was now pock-marked with age. Its mountainous slate roof of peaks and valleys and vaulted gables ... once encased in a necklace of hammered copper as bright and shiny as a new penny when first coined ... was now a dark and crusty green.

At the foot of Merrywood Hall, one-hundred and twenty time-worn sandstone steps down the hillside, was Merrywood Garden, matching the two-hundred feet wide by one-hundred feet deep foot-print of Merrywood Hall. The English ivy climbing the six-foot high brick walls surrounding the garden on three sides had succeeded in scratching out chunks of mortar holding the hand-made Kingston bricks in place.

The replacement rough-hewn cedar beams held up by rows of wannabe Greek columns had begun to split open again. While the regimented soldier bricks defending the pebbled foot-paths crisscrossing the garden from the persistent spread of crab grass had begun to lose their seasonal battle.

The only remnants almost untouched by the erosive hands of time were the sculpted marble bodies of Rubenesque women, standing naked and silent, tears from decades of neglect staining their cheeks and eternally youthful breasts.

#

Most of the converted faculty offices in Merrywood Hall were the same size: small and cramped. Two on the ground floor, one of which was Dr. Sean MacDonald's, were complete with kindergarten-size bathrooms hiding behind out-of-square doors fitted with painted-over brass locks that no longer worked. Sean's office also had a matching pair of west-facing leaded stained glass windows, and whenever the late afternoon sunlight slipped through the stained-glass panels it caused the silver and red crystalline specks embedded in the stone walls to sparkle like diamonds and rust.

#

"It's not locked," Sean called out in response to the soft knocking on his office door. "Let yourself in, Ollie."

Sean MacDonald's once sharp angular features had been softened by time. The meticulous beard he'd taken twenty years to get just right was now brushed with gray. His face had also begun to show his age: it wasn't anything like the cracks on the wind blown faces of Kansas farmers, just soft-spoken creases crackling around his eyes.

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The heavy oak and brass-hinged door glided open, as if by itself, followed by a deep baritone, "Good morning!" and the rest of Oliver Shore, barrel chest and all.

Oliver was short, stout and muscular, with a bushy-red beard that appeared to be held in place by the gold wire-rimmed glasses hooked on his over-sized ears that not even his long curly Irish-red hair could hide. With his tattered wool blazer, high-topped Oxfords and tartan tie cinching the collar of his wrinkled white shirt to his thick neck, Oliver looked like he had just walked off the stage of a Victorian play by Oscar Wilde.

Oliver stood perfectly still, smiling, watching Sean fight with an unruly stack of uncooperative papers in a losing effort to put them into a neat orderly pile on his lap.

Oliver asked, "Still grading senior theses, my friend?"

Sean gave up on his struggle and let the papers slide off his lap onto the floor.

"Yes. It's like having a root canal without Novocain."

Oliver frowned. "Awfully late, aren't we?"

Sean's affection for Oliver and his curious gnome-like ways tickled his face into a relaxed smile. "Yes, I am, Doctor Shore. But I've never been on time with my grades."

Oliver glanced around the office and frowned. "I'll come back later if you wish."

Sean shook his head. "Other than commencement, Ollie, I don't have a single appointment for the rest of my life ... except for my unannounced future demise."

Oliver raised his hand. "Have you forgotten the meeting Dean Potter wants you to have with your successor, who was confirmed by the Trustees last evening?"

Sean half-laughed. "I told Sara an hour ago, and for the umpteenth time, that I would not meet with Dr. Koch. Which prompted Sara to turn beet-red, refer to me as one of my body parts, then storm out of my office and slam the door behind her."

Oliver shrugged and began shuffling around the office. He stopped and stood in front a large wall-hung tapestry and muttered to himself, "It's exquisite ... I love it."

Sean quipped, "It's yours. Take it."

Oliver replied in a startled choir-boy pitched voice. "You can't be serious!"

He stepped closer and began examining the tapestry.

"Do you have any idea where it's from, what all of the images and medallions mean, and what it's worth?"

Oliver's questions told Sean Oliver probably knew the answers to his questions.

"All I know is that it's very old, it's silk, and it's hand-woven. And I don't care or want to know what it may be worth. It was given to me by my philosophy instructor at the University of Buffalo, Father Bollman. A house of a man! Bob showed up the night before he was scheduled to board a train to join an ecumenical enclave in a monastery somewhere in Missouri ... never to be heard from again ... and gifted me with it."

Sean pointed and took aim at Oliver.

"I'm giving it to you in the same spirit of friendship. Partly because you love antiquities, partly because you really don't care what something like this is worth, and partly because I have no place to hang it in my new apartment. Which is on Molly Lane, a mile or so from Greene Farms." Sean frowned. "I had a student named Greene. I think her first name was Catherine. Smartest student I ever had. And the tallest girl!"

Sean gestured with a back-handed wave of his hand.

"Take the tapestry the second I'm out of here."

"May I at least pay you something for it?"

Sean replied through a sinister smile. "Yes."

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Oliver perked up and focused his entire being on Sean.

"Your payment will be that you must agree to pass it along the same way in which you got it." Sean laughed. "You must formally include that condition in your will."

A simultaneous nodding of their heads mimicked two ten-year-old boys making a secret pact that would damn them forever if it were broken.

Oliver turned to face Sean, his demeanor changing from informal to formal.

"About your research."

Oliver paused, took a long deep breath, then continued.

"I know you told me you didn't want to have anything to do with it anymore, but I would like to integrate your extensive research efforts into my quasi-related research."

"If you want twenty years of my life, Ollie, you've got to do better than that."

"Fair enough. When I was at Oxford some years back, I met a young Anglican priest assigned to the Archbishop's antiquities research staff at Canterbury. We kept bumping into each other in the rare books room, which was not open to the public, and we became good friends. He told me, in strict confidence, he was working on a project involving ancient pre-Christian hedonistic rituals related to the phases of the moon and the practice of harvesting one's heart, while they were still alive! When he was having difficulty finding examples of these ancient religious practices, I offered to help. When he showed me copies of untranslated original texts on both linen and parchment, which were penned in various different early dialects I was not familiar with, I was hooked. Although he would not disclose where he got the texts."

Oliver paused, his gaze darting about the office as if searching for memories.

"I found indirect references to these rituals, but only by name not what actually took place. And in many of the ancient cultures in the far east and surrounding the Mediterranean. But nothing concrete. Just oblique entries alluding to violent orgiastic and deviant sexual behavior. Which had some resemblance to the rites surrounding Cybele and her consort Attis. They had also been penned in different and apparently unrelated dialects and at different times in history. And many of the texts contained complex cryptic alpha-numerical code-like sentences. Which I was unable to decode."

Oliver shut his eyes, stood in silence, then nodded as if recalling something.

"When I succeeded in translating random passages, in what I originally thought were unrelated texts but proved to be related, and shared this with my colleague, an Anglican priest, he did some checking and discovered the manuscripts had been the property of an Anglican Bishop. Who, like my friend, was assigned to Canterbury. When he dug into restricted church records, which he refused to tell me how he did it, he learned the Bishop's name was Reeves Knight, the personal archivist for the Archbishop of Canterbury." Oliver paused, then said softly, "Bishop Knight was found dead on his sixty-sixth birthday, brutally murdered, apparently, during some sort of Pagan ritual."

Oliver took on Sean's expectant gaze.

"He was killed in much the same way our wives were murdered! And the same way my friend was found a few weeks after we began connecting-the-dots, so to speak. I did not know it at the time, but he had reported back to his superiors, which we had agreed he would not do until we found the rest of Bishop Knight's papers."

Sean snapped, "Take the damn files, Ollie. I hope you find what you're looking for." Sean gestured across his office. "That oak cabinet contains most of my research notes. There are also a few dozen books in Latin and ancient Greek, along with my

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notations tagged to hundreds of entries, which I collected on my journey to nowhere. The only things not there are my personal journals and primary research. There's a dozen file boxes in the attic of my new digs." Sean hesitated. "You can have everything. What's here and at my apartment, after I move out of this tomb of mine."

Sean slapped Oliver's butt.

"Now ... go! ... and let me finish what I was doing."

# #

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## IV

30 April

Dear Oliver...

Oliver.....

With this letter, I will address what I believe we both want to know: who murdered our wives; why; and why the way they did. I also want to know why my son was also murdered.

The autopsy report placed Emily's death on the night of the full Wolf Moon, which I thought was significant even if no one else did. Like that idiot Assistant D.A., Arnold Kratz. That son-of-a-bitch did everything he could to convince the grand jury that I murdered my wife.

I cannot say with certainty what the coincidence of the full moon could have meant, if anything, simply because there are, as you know, too many possible explanations. Perhaps you can make some sense out of the color photocopy of the following text, which I received years ago, anonymously. It was in an old and tattered envelope and addressed 'Sean'. The original poem was written in faded sepia ink, the letters thick, crusty, like dried blood.

Take this kiss upon the brow!  
And, in parting from you know,  
This much let me avow:  
You are not wrong who deem  
That my days have been a dream;  
Yet if hope has flown away  
In a night, or in a day,  
In a vision, or in none,  
Is it therefore the less gone?  
All that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream.  
I stand amid the roar  
Of a surf-tormented shore,  
And I hold within my hand

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Grains of the golden sand -  
How few! yet how they creep  
Through my fingers to the deep,  
While I weep - while I weep!  
O God! can I not save  
One from the pitiless wave?  
Is all that we see or seem  
But a dream within a dream?

This text was 'purloined' from the poem *A Dream Within a Dream*, by Edgar Allan Poe. A nurse in the hospital gave it to me after my mother died. She told me she found it under the pillow, when she stripped the bed. She also told me she hadn't seen it anywhere in my mother's room before that. But she wasn't positive, since my mother was distracting everyone and, she said, screaming at them to leave her alone and let it die as they rushed her to surgery (Note: Yes, she said let 'it' die).

As for my mother's death, from what I have been able to cobble together there were complications of some sort and when my mother's condition changed for the worse, her doctor decided to take her into the operating room, to surgically try to find out what was inside her.

Point of reference: I was 7 years old at the time.

I was never told what my mother's cause of death was, just that she died in the operating room. But when I was waiting for them to bring my mother back to her room (before I learned that she had died), I heard nurses in the hallway talking about a still-born child that hadn't shown up on the x-rays, because it did not have any internal skeletal structure. And that it was so small, my mother never appeared to be pregnant.

Even more confusing, and frightening (at the time), was that one of the nurses said the doctor estimated the fetus to be six months old. At the time, I did not know what it all meant. But I do now (I think!). You will find a more extensive discussion of this in my journals under 'Mother's Death'.

My father was never the same after my mother died. It was as if he was in a trance. He never allowed the subject to be discussed. And he told me never to talk about my mother's illness

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and what I heard the nurses talking about. I never did. And that included not telling my wife, who only knew that my mother died when I was seven.

You, my dear friend, are now the only exception.

I am enclosing copies of two keys: One is a key to my new apartment; the other is a key to the locks on the file cabinets being relocated to the attic in my apartment.

Finally, I suggest you remove the tapestry, before my replacement arrives: she has a habit of 'taking' what she likes."

Sean.....

# #

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## V

29 May

Catherine Greene .....Greene Farms

Sean took the sharp left turn onto Molly Lane far too fast. The new tires on his restored Austin Healy 3000 roadster squealed in protest, then broke free. Drifting sideways, heading for a barbed wire fence guarding the pasture, Sean down-shifted, floored it, regained control, and continued speeding down the narrow country road, turning everything around him into a blur of grays, greens and streaks of rusting wire.

The wind began slapping at him as if telling him to slow down. When he saw he was doing eighty, 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 settled down to 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. You'll know it's busy if there is a long line of cars inching along on on the side of the road.

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 natural blond hair; cerulean blue eyes; and 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

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program after graduation, Sean had made an effort to keep up with what Cathy was doing, but gave up. Not because he didn't want to, because he couldn't: Cathy had joined the Marines. 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. She then held up a clear plastic bag with a pinch of her fingers and let it go. Sean jumped up and grabbed it, fumbling the baskets off his lap and onto the floor in front of the passenger seat.

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 a 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.

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, paused, glanced up-and-down one row, nodded, dropped the baskets onto the ground, knelt down, and started feeling his way through the leaves, plucking off strawberries with a pinch of his fingers, filling his hand ... sampling a strawberry with each handful ... then depositing them into the basket.

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With his baskets full, Sean laid back, shut his eyes and drifted back in time.

#

*..... It's all right, son, I'm right here with you. Are you sure it wasn't just the shadows from the moonlight?*

*Yes.*

*Okay ... now calm down and tell me exactly what you saw. And remember, you're safe here with me .....*

#

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, stopping inches from his face.

"Miss Greene!" Sean gasped for air. "What if someone sees us?"

"What is there to see?" Cathy asked, 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 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.

"It's nice to see you again, Sean," Cathy said with the calm self-assurance of a woman, not the girl he once knew as one of his students. 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."

## STRAWBERRY MOON

"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.

# #

# STRAWBERRY MOON

## VI

12 June

### She Dissolved Into the Fading Dark of Night

She silently glided up to the door of Sean's office and paused, listening.

The door opened. She peered inside, her gaze raking the room, as if to be certain it was safe for her to enter. Nodding, she walked in and waved her hand. The door closed. 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.

The walls of Sean's office had been stripped bare. His heavy Victorian oak desk was wrapped in a rope-tied quilted blanket. The floor-to-ceiling drapes were gone, leaving the stately leaded stained-glass windows looking common without their mantle of royal blue. The hanging silk tapestry and its wall-mounted bracket had been secreted away. The oak file cabinet, empty drawers left pulled out, was topped with stacks of threadbare linen-jacketed journals. 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 stack of papers in the moonlight, in a whisper, occasionally checking-off entries with a tap of her finger and approving nod or disapproving shake of her head.

Pausing, she stopped and read aloud one of the numbered hand-written notes.

*"I did not find any 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!"*

## STRAWBERRY MOON

Nodding, she snarled, "If it were not so, your species would not exist!"  
Skipping over a dozen entries, she stopped and continued reading aloud.

*"Men are afraid of women, because they unconsciously sense that women are more powerful, sexually, than they 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."*

She nodded , looked 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

## VIII

17 June

Sean's New Pied-à-Terre ... Start of a New Life

The howling wind and driving rain roared in after midnight, blowing out the stars and drowning the moon. There was thunder and lightening, too; early for this time of year. It all stopped just before dawn and became whisper quiet, the early morning air filled with the scent of burnt sugar, the gingerbread on the old house swollen shut, the clogged gutters spilling over and playing lazy drip-drop tunes on the porch roof below.

Dear Sara.....

Here are the lesson plans for my graduate seminars.

Sorry they're late: I wasn't into it last semester.

I would not be offended if Dr. Koch tossed out my work and prepared her own syllabi.

Also, a 'heads up': I disconnected my phone. I decided it was the only way I would get the peace and quiet I need to write.

Drop me a note if I overlooked anything.

Sean.....

Although cryptic and to the point, Sean reread his note to Sara, to make sure nothing he said could be construed by her as an invitation. *At least not yet.*

#

Compared with his office in Merrywood Hall, the study in Sean's apartment was easily a fourth the size and spartan to the point of looking like a prison cell. As for the kitchen, there were no curtains on the solitary double-width south-facing window. The walls in the hallway and all of the rooms were bone white and bare. The clunky desk from his office, which he decided at the last minute not to put into storage, faced the curtain-less tip-out double-hung window in his study. Between the window sill and the top of his desk, and within easy reach, were three shelves the width of the desk filled with original copies of *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, beginning with 1967. To his left was a bookshelf crowned with the ten-volume set of the Oxford English Dictionary.

#

## STRAWBERRY MOON

After slipping his note to Sara into its waiting envelope, Sean reached for the unopened letter he saved for last. The return address was Greene Farms, no name or address, not that one was needed. Sean opened and eagerly read Cathy's note.....

*Sean ...*

*I called, but your phone had been disconnected.  
Does Tuesday the 18th work for you, for dinner?  
If this heat holds up and since I don't have air  
conditioning, we can set up a table on the back porch.  
Your move.*

*Cathy...*

Sean felt a sense of nervous excitement he hadn't felt in years; or at least had not let himself feel. "Be careful, MacDonald" he warned, then wondered why he said that. The mention of dinner brought up the thought of breakfast, followed by images of steaming hot scones drowning under melted butter.

*I wonder if Julian's is open yet?*

#

The slap of a screen door shutting prompted Sean to look up from unzipping the tonneau covering his Austin Healy.

"Doctor MacDonald!" Jean Murphy called out as she stepped to the edge of the porch, wiping her hands in her apron. "What in the world are you doing up at this hour?" Letting go of her tattered white apron, Jean braced her hands on her narrow hips and stared at Sean, waiting for ... or more accurately demanding ... an answer.

Jean Murphy's skin was smooth and hard like fired clay. What few wrinkles there were appeared to have been drawn on her face with great care, not pressed into her flesh by time or scratched into it by worry. She wasn't fat or thin. And she had that sturdy look of hard work about her; seventy-five years worth by Sean's reckoning. Her hair was solid gray like the bark of an oak tree in winter. And she stood just as straight. Her eyes were Irish green. When she spoke, it was clear and in your face.

Sean asked, "Jean, please, call me Sean."

"And just where are you off to young man?"

"First Woodstock. Then the college to see a good friend and colleague."

Jean asked, "why Woodstock?"

Sean hopped into his car and wedged himself down behind the lacquered wood-rimmed steering wheel. "I want to get some scones for breakfast at Julian's Bakery. They've got the best damn scones in the Hudson Valley."

Jean's face lit up like a ten-cent sparkler.

"Wait!"

Jean disappeared into the house and scurried back out, waving a ten-dollar bill

## STRAWBERRY MOON

as she skipped down the steps and ran across the lawn, showing no signs of her age.  
"Bring some back for me?" she asked and tucked the bill into Sean's shirt pocket.

#

Stopping in front of the double-locked door of Bruce Fanning's office in Merrywood Hall, Sean reread his hastily written note to Bruce.

Bruce.....

I had dinner last night with Catherine Greene. She's a former student: tall, blond hair, with piercing blue eyes. She's quite a woman: super-smart; beautiful; and with a figure that would turn most women green with envy (no pun intended).

I'm going back for a sunrise breakfast. She told me there is something magical about a farm early in the morning. My childhood memories recall back-breaking hard work early in the morning!

I don't know what she sees in me? I'm not rich and I've led the celibate life of a monk for two decades, except for one act of supreme stupidity, which we ... read as you ... will not talk about if you two ever meet.

Sean.....

Folding up the note, Sean slipped it under Bruce's office door and bolted out of Merrywood Hall.

# #

# STRAWBERRY MOON

**X**

23 June

Dr. Oliver Shore

Sean sat down on his porch steps to read Oliver's handwritten note, which had been neatly taped to one of the four large cartons sitting on the porch beside him.

*Sean...*

*I put all of your papers into new folders and in date order in these storage boxes. While I'm sorry to have missed you, perhaps it's best, since I have 'hundreds' of questions. However, once I have everything and in chronological order, hopefully, my questions will have been answered (as I am sure you feel the same way).*

*Now, a few favors: (1) please prepare a summary of all milestone events in your life; (2) give serious thought to your interpretation for/of the Poe poems you received and referenced in your research.*

*Once I'm settled in the UK, I'll send my address.*

*Oliver...*

Sean slipped the folder with Oliver's notes back into the carton he left open and wondered, *You put everything in date order? I packed everything in chronological order.* Sean shrugged. *Or did I?* Sean laughed to himself and asked, "And prepare a summary of all important milestone events in my life, complete with dates? Why don't you just ask me to write a friggin autobiography, my friend!"

"Sean MacDonald!" Jean Murphy called out. "Watch your language, young man."

Sean jumped up and turned around, to find Jean standing on the porch in front of the entrance to her apartment, which was the entire lower half of her house.

Jean gestured to the boxes. "The man who left those said he could not wait. He sounded British to me. Dressed that way, too. Sloppy neat. He wanted to take them upstairs, but I said he couldn't."

Jean pointed to the boxes. "Let me help you," and picked up a box. Sean couldn't keep from smiling at the thought of a seventy five-year-old woman helping him carry thirty or forty pound boxes up a flight of eighteen steps to his apartment.

# #

# STRAWBERRY MOON

## XI

24 June

Dear Sean.....Cathy

Blocking the entrance to the strawberry fields was a sagging galvanized steel chain with a DO NOT ENTER sign almost touching the ground. The chain was held up at each end by thick rough-cut wood posts secured in overflowing puddles of hardened cement. When Sean didn't see Cathy anywhere, he guessed he was early and picked a spot to park along the side of the road and away from the sap-dripping maple trees.

Settling back, Sean shut his eyes and listened to the lazy and curiously soothing school-click, school-click, school-click of the automatic sprinklers watering the fields.

Memories of seeing Cathy began replaying the clips of their meeting, slowly, frame-by-frame. It had become a regular replay for him. Sean held onto that precarious edge of sleep he loved: floating between light and dark, hearing and not hearing, knowing and not knowing. It was delicious when he got it just right.

The growl of a passing tractor yanked him back to reality. He glanced at his watch. *Seven-thirty? Doesn't make sense? She has to have been up for hours by now.*

Sean looked up and down Molly Lane. Squinting his eyes half-shut to block out the glare from the morning sun, he scanned the fields. The only thing he saw was a flatbed truck in the field across the road and what appeared to be someone sitting on the bed, leaning up against the cab, arms folded, head bowed, as if asleep.

"Get your eyes checked, MacDonald," he chided.

Grabbing the bag of scones, Sean climbed out of his car, feeling dumb at the thought of Cathy having been there all this time and him sitting in his car and day-dreaming. He crossed the road, stepped over the chain and started walking out into the field. Ten yards or so from the truck, he took a second look and started laughing to himself as he skipped into a lazy jog. Hopping up onto the truck bed, shaking his head in amusement, Sean snatched the paper out of the finger-less hand of the straw-stuffed scarecrow and read the note.

Sean.....

If you're reading this, you have met my stand-in. A thermos of hot coffee and container of sliced and sugared strawberries are on the front seat. They should go nicely with the scones.

Why am I MIA?

I received a call late yesterday from a caterer in Manhattan, looking for 10,000 strawberries for an exclusive private party. When she told me it was being held in the American

## STRAWBERRY MOON

Wing at the Met and asked they be hand-picked, sorted and size-matched, I thought it was some sort of prank.

She asked ('demanded') that someone from the farm deliver them and prepare them. She also asked if we grew mint, and if we did, she needed 12,000 mint leaves.

Convinced the woman was a prankster, I half-seriously told her it would cost a dollar a strawberry, which included delivery. And we had to be paid 50% up-front (read as 'before we picked anything') and 50% on delivery. And the mint would be a nickel a leaf, since we had to pull-up the plants and put them in water-packs to keep the leaves from wilting.

To my surprise, she said, 'see you at seven sharp tomorrow morning' then switched me to someone in her office to make credit card payment arrangements.

Since I couldn't reach you by phone, I called your number at the college, hoping you might be there or somewhere else in Merrywood Hall.

Who is that woman who answered the phone in your old office? Not very nice!

I'll tell you all about 'Cathy's Day in the Big Apple', when I get back.

Cathy.....

# #

# STRAWBERRY MOON

## XII

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 found 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!"

He slapped the padlock Bruce put on his office door when he went out of town.

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: old books; skinny books; fat books; books with cracked and peeling backs. A half-dozen small antique electrified brass lamps were set out like flowerpots on spindly end tables, matching credenza and massive roll-top desk.

The seat cushion 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 waiting to be hung up. One caught his attention. Slipping into the office, he 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.

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 squeaked comically and snatched up the bronze sculpture on the table beneath the painting. Barely eight-inches tall, the bronze depicted a fox, a

## STRAWBERRY MOON

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. The empty well was threaded for a glass reservoir that had been lost somewhere in time.

"Recognize it?" a woman asked.

Sean spun around and suddenly 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 sheer 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 shrugged and half-smiled.

"We 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."

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 soft pat of her hand. Sean watched as she walked around the office as if she were mentally taking inventory. Slipping her key into the door, Patricia looked back at Sean.

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

*Get out of here!* Sean told himself and stepped out into the darkened hallway.

Patricia waved for Sean to follow her. "Better hurray, "I wouldn'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

## XIII

26 June

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

Except for a handful of straw hats bobbing up and down under the watchful eye of the sun, the fields along the north side of Molly Lane were empty. Pulling off the road, Sean eased up to the gate house, slipped into neutral, and sat back, waiting for Sally Curtis to finish with another customer on the other side of the gate house. Sally was patient and pleasant, like all of the women, young and old, working for Cathy.

Sally spun around. "Hi, Doctor MacDonald!" She winked, wrinkling her face when she did, confirming Sean's belief that she was older older than what he first thought.

"Cathy's not back from the City yet. When she called early this morning ... and I mean early! ... she told me the reception at the museum ran well past midnight and she was staying with someone named Martha MacGregor. She's the big deal caterer who ordered the truckload of strawberries we all worked through the night picking, sorting, washing, drying and packing, all to her specifications."

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

"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 shave and wear a suit and tie."

Resting her arms on the two-by-twelve strip of lumber serving double duty as a counter top and window sill, 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 I sweat so much. Cathy will kill me!"

Sean said reassuringly, "No she won't ... she won't know," and 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, Sean 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 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, he snapped the tonneau in place and headed for the strawberry fields, but stopped and snapped at himself. "Damn! You forgot baskets, MacDonald!"

## STRAWBERRY MOON

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 spun 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?"

"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 'whatever' shrug, Sean kicked-off his shoes and buried his bare feet beneath the dusty soil. He then snatched-up 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. "Sounds 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 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, putting her hands on her hips. "I want to drive it." She laughed, then 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," he said with a nonchalant shrug, and immediately wished he hadn't said what he did. "I'm sure a California woman can handle it." He took-on her challenging gaze. "But before I give my car keys to a stranger, shouldn't I know who she is?"

Dusting off her hands on her hips, adding more smudged hand prints to the collage on her skirt, she marched up to Sean and offered her hand.

"I'm Karen ... and you are?"

Taking 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 it out of his hand and started walking toward the car.

*What the hell are you doing!* he 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?" she asked, but did not wait for his answer as she kept walking.

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

## STRAWBERRY MOON

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 a 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, then 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 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 looked down.

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?"

Sean propped himself up onto his elbows. "How long have you been gone?"

"As long as you were asleep."

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

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?" Karen 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, slowly filling their baskets.

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

## STRAWBERRY MOON

makes so much more sense. Don't you agree, Doctor MacDonald?"

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

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

"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.

Wishing he hadn't been so harsh, *So stupid*, Sean pleaded, "Please forgive me for being....."

"Rude?"

Karen 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?"

Smiling, 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." Hearing himself say this ... admitting it ... made him think of Bruce. "I'll bring something special ... something you may not have had."

Sean held his breath, expecting Karen to tell him she couldn't, or worse, that 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 quipped playfully, "Midnight it is!" She then said in a firm business-like

## STRAWBERRY MOON

voice, "I must go now. I have some pressing matters to take care of in Rhinecliff."

With a playful wave, Karen walked to her car and climbed in.

Sean watched her drive away. Part of him couldn't help wondering, *Do you really think she'll come?* Another part replied *Why not.* Still another part added *Are you sure?*

He nodded and replied with conviction "Yes!" But he wasn't sure and he knew it.

#

Dear Bruce.....

I drove onto campus the day before yesterday with the hope of finding you there.

Why didn't you tell me Potter gave my office to Patricia Koch? She scared the hell out me, when she caught me poking around in 'her' office.

I now have a better understanding of the woman than I did five years ago. However, I don't think she has learned to control her anger. Probably never will.

Read as ... don't get too close to her ... my friend.

Sean.....

# #

# STRAWBERRY MOON

## XIV

27 June

### Strawberry Moon

Turning onto Molly Lane, Sean sped up, killed the lights, slipped into neutral and let the car coast 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 Karen 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 Karen's face.

"You look different."

"How so?" she asked.

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

Karen laughed, slipped past him, darted to the end of the rows of corn and stepped out into a small clearing, flooded with moonlight and snapped the blanket she was carrying into a billowing wave that hung in the air then settled 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. 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.

## STRAWBERRY MOON

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 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, without speaking. 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," he 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.

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."

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

#

## STRAWBERRY MOON

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.

Sean scurried about, collecting everything lying on the ground and tossed it into the blanket. Grabbing the corners, he hoisted the make-shift bag over his shoulder.

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.

Sean blocked her path.

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

# #

# STRAWBERRY MOON

## XVI

28 June

### BODY FOUND

George Kraft  
Staff Reporter

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

# #

PreView

# 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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