

# **Never Tempted**

**By Chris Giannini**



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## **PART I**

### **THE STAGE IS SET**

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Conflict**

Rachel descended the stairs of the elevated deck. She produced a pack of cigarettes along with her favorite green alien head lighter, and walked towards the side of the opposite side of the house away from the deck. She slowly lit the cigarette and reveled in the soothing sound of the crackle. With a puff of the cigarette, all the conversations of the past hour faded into smoke, and her entire body relaxed.

She tried to forget what had transpired. She tried to forget that she loved him so much and that she feared what he had to say. She tried to forget what happened between all of her friends. She wanted to rid her mind of such these troublesome burdens. Couldn't they all just forget and forgive? She only focused on the swaying breeze, the green trees, and the light of the sun sinking behind them. She was one with nature and the mists of her cigarette. This was the way Rachel found release from all her problems. Only the natural Earth gave her solace, and of course, this cigarette.

The flaky ashes of the cigarette fell, and a billow of smoke dispersed into the sky. Rachel lightly inhaled the smoke from the Djarum clove into her lungs. Rachel felt the thick sensation of the incense from the clove cigarette on her lips, a sensation that was wholly different from any other kind of regular cigarette. She took another long hearty drag, exhaled, and let the smoke permeate around her. She loved the smell of the smoke and the way it moved effortlessly through the air. If only the smoke could rush through her brain and make her forget what had happened. Rachel frowned. No matter how hard she tried, Rachel could not stop thinking about what he had said. She could not stop thinking about the way her best friends had acted.

She thrust the cigarette away from her mouth and held it at her side. She stood a few feet away from the door to the back room of the house, kicking the dirt at her feet. Shadows moved slowly towards her as the setting sun's beams struck the house. To right and behind here was the deck, attached to the side of the house's back room, where Marty and Cameron stood a short time ago.

Birds chirped distinctly, communicating in their own earthly mating language. They flew from wire to wire, from branch to branch, full of life amongst the smoggy clouds and the warm houses. Rachel singled out one particular bird; it was a tiny red thing with brilliant feathers and a harmonious chirp. It sang delightfully, soaring above the earth. Although she had seen the bird less than an hour ago, it felt like days. What would time be if it were measured in terms of events instead of seconds? Rachel's sparkling blue eyes had dreamily angled upwards and peered through the sliding glass door that barred the deck from the room. She had seen the bird when Marty and Cameron were on the deck and it had returned to it captivate her attention once again. Her mind replayed and recounted the events that had just transpired.

She had looked beyond the gossipy conversation of her friends, Lora and Claudia, who had been sitting nearby inside the back room adjacent to the deck. She had been trying to ignore Cameron and Marty, who had been steeped in serious conversation outside on the deck next to the back room. She had still been able see them through the sliding glass doors of the deck attached to the back room. But Rachel's gaze had been focused on something insignificant and small: the bird.

Her glance had followed the bird in the shadow of the late afternoon sun, as its shape refracted through the glass of the sliding door. Rachel always retained a special affinity with nature, but this gorgeous red creature was something beyond nature and time. It was irresistible; Rachel had not been able to take her eyes off of it. She had not known exactly what type of bird it was, but its beauty had sent chills up her spine. The conversation that had been held by her friends did not capture any interest compared to the elegance of this bird in flight. It had been completely part of nature, yet the bird flew purposefully in a calculated kind of dance. Rachel had blocked out all conversation, all the noises of distraction, all passages of time, and lost herself to the red bird's dance.

This brilliant winged creature took no notice of the ground below or the obstacles in its path. It artfully darted through the air between trees. It did not care at all about its direction but only about the activity of its flight at hand. The bird's will pressed it onward, without purpose, without meaning, except to embody the beauty of the world and to thrive among that beauty. She had marveled at the bird's incredible uncaring free spirit. Finally, it had perched itself on a railing nearby and observed the conversation of the teenagers on the deck. Rachel had turned and watched them as well, and almost mimicked the bird's expression. She had been far enough way that the conversation was difficult to

overhear, though she had been able to hear muffled tones. Here the bird had brought her thoughts right back to the very thing she was trying to avoid, but even then, she could not harbor that much discontent for Marty and Cameron.

Rachel smiled to herself in a way that someone sighs with hidden knowledge; she thought that Marty and Cameron were both beautiful representations of the male species. They had glared at each other on that deck, in anger, and Rachel had wondered how this could be with those who had been such close friends. They had become quite different from each other over the years, but now so different to argue like this, Rachel had thought.

Around Cameron's neck had been gold chains and in both of his ears had hung studs of gold. He was about 5' 9" with strong cheekbones and long silken black hair down to his shoulders. He was skinny and light-skinned, very white indeed. Despite his thin form, he retained a bulging musculature that was quite impressive. Soft black garments flowed evenly around his torso and tucked into the leather belt around his black jeans. Rachel thought he was alluring, mysterious and dark. He was compelling in the way that some darkened things can be. It was as if he did not belong in this century, as if he was displaced from time.

Marty was nearly equal to Cameron's height, but his appearance varied immensely. A puffy soft face rested on Marty's broad shoulders. One might even think his baby face was "cute". Spiked brown hair was layered very carefully on his scalp. He wore a green t-shirt that expanded from the muscles underneath his torso. Marty was extremely athletic, and studious. He wore thin, wire-rimmed glasses that gave him an air of calm intellect. A shiny gold watch on his left wrist reflected the sun's dimming beams; it had been a present that Rachel had given him.

Marty and Cameron had always confided in one another since an early age, since the times that they played in sand boxes together. Rachel remembered that they had always gotten into trouble together, and had always studied together. For years, they were an inseparable pair. When high school came along, Cameron took a liking for a different crowd. He started smoking and acting differently, tougher, as if Marty was not as good as the new friends he made. Marty remained studious and even managed to be athletically inclined. Cameron and Marty saw less and less of each other and by their senior year, they visited only

occasionally, but still managed to confide in each other. There was great respect between them that came from a long history of friendship.

Their conversation had been serious, and almost frightening for Rachel, as she had never seen them like this. A gritting tension had brewed up between these two lifelong friends. Cameron had lit up a cigarette on the enclosed deck (something Rachel's aunt would never let anyone do) and had looked away from Marty. She recalled that Marty shook his head and said something harsh to Cameron. Marty's normally jovial face had hardened, and his countenance wriggled in discomfort. Muffled frustrated tones had distinctively rattled the glass door. Rachel's eyebrows had been piqued in concern.

While Marty was flustered, Cameron had maintained complete composure. Cameron smiled, standing proud and confident, and without uttering word, he had been laughing. When Marty spoke to Cameron, he was shaking his open hand in the air, emphasizing words that had been unheard to Rachel. It was clear to Rachel that he had been trying to prompt a reaction from Cameron but could not affect him. Cameron had looked right through Marty, as if he had known what Marty would say before he said it.

Cameron had managed to catch Rachel's concerned glance and winked at her. She remembered her shoulders tensing up and chills running through her body. Chills she had thought were long gone. Rachel had squirmed uncomfortably on the couch, and she had looked away from Cameron's glance. The concentration she had devoted to the bird had disappeared; the bird had departed. Even the bird seemed to feel uncomfortable when confronted with the arguing teenagers. Perhaps the beauty of such a creature was somehow tainted by harsh words, and it could not stand to bear witness to any form of argument.

Rachel took another puff of her cigarette and recalled her friends, Lora and Claudia, sitting in the back room gossiping, and her mind wandered to the back room, which she loved. The back room of the house led to an adjacent family room with a fire place and then stairs lead down into a renovated basement. Directly ahead of the back from the direction Rachel had been facing in the room was another sliding door that led from this room onto the deck. Rachel had looked around the room, and as she always seemed to do, had taken into account the assortment of items there, even though she had been in this room far too many times to count.

It was constructed like any back room in a contemporary American house; it was a supplemental room, added to the house after its initial construction. The house itself was not a mansion by any means

but still maintained a lavish quality indicative of an upper class lifestyle. Although the back room was typical, the furniture was not. Rachel's uncle had inherited great wealth from his father's business. Rachel never knew this man, her grandfather; she never understood exactly what his business was. All she knew was that her father's brother inherited all the wealth from him, and many heirlooms. This room contained more heirlooms from her grandfather than any other room in the house. Everything wreaked of old times long since turned to dust.

The room was pristinely clean; no trash or clutter was present. It was used infrequently. Two old couches with flowery patterns faced each other at opposite ends of the room. A grandfather clock stood like a pillar next to the couch Rachel had rested on. There were several hand-made tables situated besides the couches. Delicate oriental lamps sat on each table next to the couches; however, no light was needed at this hour. The sun's rays had raced through two thin windows behind the couch opposite Rachel, illuminating dust in the room like golden particles from some magical realm.

A mountain goat's head with massive curling horns hung on the wall. This eerie cranium was an heirloom from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when men used to value such hunting prizes. Various paintings hung on the walls, perhaps a William Blake work here or maybe a van Gogh painting there. Sometimes, the paintings could not be so easily attached to a particular painter; there were nearly a dozen of them, creating a gallery of odd artwork. The pictures were all very esoteric, and most definitely made this room Rachel's favorite in the entire house. Its artistic atmosphere had always made Rachel feel like she was in a comfortable museum. It was out of place in a modern house like this one. This room could have easily existed a century ago.

Of course, in addition to all the exciting eccentric art, there had to be some mundane image here, so her aunt's boring tastes could be represented. A pretty scene of pine trees or pretty mountains. 'Something completely unoriginal,' Rachel always thought. Rachel's aunt never liked this room very much; she always thought it was dull. For some reason, Rachel's uncle worshipped her aunt. Rachel could not stand it, a nice man like her uncle corrupted and brought down by her dismal aunt. Perhaps her uncle was a bit too nice, even a bit naïve. Her aunt always selfishly nitpicked and nagged, and her uncle was oblivious to his wife's constant reproach. Rachel's aunt was only concerned with her real estate profession, and anything else was secondary. With her uncle's inheritance providing a great deal of wealth, the family had

nothing to worry about. Nothing except Rachel's aunt squandering the money on superficial items like leather couches, minx coats, gaudy jewelry, and of course, pretty pictures for hanging on walls.

Her aunt had many nasty habits, one of which was her dedication to marijuana. She was quite addicted; she smoked at least twice a day, maybe four times a day on weekends. It was a wonder she was able to maintain any job, however, she was one of those women with many connections. She was decent looking and curvy for her age, and it was certainly conceivable that she used men to get what she wanted. And naturally, her uncle would have taken her to be completely faithful. Rachel had no hard evidence that her aunt used men in this fashion, however it would not be a surprise if she did. Her aunt was not a good person, in Rachel's eyes. She was the opposite of what her mother had been; her aunt was the bane of her teenage existence, overbearing, strict, and utterly self-absorbed.

Besides a picture or two on the wall, Rachel felt like her aunt was a million miles away. In this room, any dislike Rachel had for her aunt dissipated. She was always content here. Rachel had looked at the grandfather clock next to the couch. The minute hand on the old clock clicked by steadily, and this clock could have been present 1,000 years ago, telling time for people before time had even been invented. Yes, the clock appeared so old and worn, but it was grand and majestic. It would seem that an eternity had passed by in this back room, but in reality, only five minutes had elapsed. The back room was a good place for getting away; it was a place where one could exit the standard stresses of every day life and relax with friends.

Lora and Claudia had rested on the opposite couch. Their conversation had been very clearly audible, even though Rachel had chosen to ignore it up until now.

"Oh, I think Cameron is so sexy," Lora had said. Lora and Claudia might as well have been separated twins at birth. Every feature, every curve, every line on their bodies were identical. Their eyes and hair length were the same, right down to the slightly tanned skin. They wore the same tight jeans and tang tops, different colors, but a like style. The only distinguishing difference between the two girls was their hair; Lora's hair was unnaturally colored blonde and Claudia's remained its natural hazel color. Even though the colors were different, their hair retained the exact same sheen and length. Their giggling harmonized together, creating a chorus of lust-filled laughter.



Rachel had chosen to glance away from Lora and Claudia, and had looked through the sliding glass door. How was it possible that each of her friends were so dear but could frustrate her so easily? It seemed that the closer Rachel became to her friends, the more they annoyed her. Indeed, Lora and Claudia completely enraged her sometimes, especially their obsession with all that was gaudy and superficial. They almost acted like younger versions of Rachel's aunt. But Rachel knew that they were just followers and mostly sought to increase their popularity. Rachel had looked out the sliding glass at Cameron and Marty. Cameron was just as gaudy as Lora and Claudia, with his gold chains and earrings. Only Marty was plain and unaffected by such things.

Claudia had spoke in her high pitched voice

"I love Cameron's eyes, and that black ribbed shirt thingy he wears. His muscles are soooo nice," Claudia had idolized. She had giggled gleefully in sync with Lora. Cameron had flicked his eyes towards them, a flirtatious side glance. Lora and Claudia had looked down towards the floor, and had refused to make eye contact with Cameron, pretending to be bashful and uninterested. Rachel had rolled her eyes, but Lora had seen Rachel's sarcastic expression.

"So, Rachel, c'mon. You can tell us about Cameron. What was he like? Didn't you sleep with him?" Lora had said, edging Rachel on. Rachel remember her cheeks become hot with embarrassed fury, and still felt the flush as she sucked another puff of her cigarette, recalling Lora's piercing voice.

"N-n-no! What would make you say something like that?" Rachel had responded. Claudia had only giggled.

"We all know you did. Everyone does. It seems like Marty is the only one who doesn't know," Claudia had said.

"Well, ahh, it's none of your business. It's no one's business!" Rachel had said. She chose to focus her attention on Marty. Just looking at him relaxed her as if a warm wash cloth had been placed to her skin. She could remember feeling like this only one other time, when her father used to carry her to bed on Friday nights as a little girl. Rachel's parents always went out on Friday nights, and she always spent time with her grandmother. Rachel had fond memories of spending time with her late grandmother, but even more, she remembered how her father used to lightly lay her to bed when she had drifted off to slumber.

Rachel smiled widely at the thought and gazed in loving awe at Marty. He possessed the same quality that her father did. He could bring that same soothing calm to her. Rachel had been distracted at the time when she was gazing at Marty lovingly, and she had almost forgot Claudia and Lora were there. If it had not been for their whispering, Rachel might have remained lost in Marty's gaze forever. But then she had heard them whispering. Rachel had sighed and shook her head, and finally had directed her glance at Lora.

"What!" Rachel had said. Lora and Claudia had looked at each other.

"Rachel, we've known since what- the 5<sup>th</sup> grade?" Claudia had said. "You've always had a crush on Cameron, and then you finally got him. And now you're with that dope Marty. He's such a dork!"

"Yeah, really, Rachel. You had Cameron Cucalga. How can you settle for that other guy. After all, I hear he has very small—."

Rachel had stood up angrily, and had interrupted Lora. She remembered quite animated, and pointing fingers at the two girls.

"All you care about are superficial things, like sex. Nothing has any meaning for you! Don't you know what love is? It's not all about how someone looks, you know," Rachel had argued.

"Oh come on, Rachel, get over it," Lora had said with slightly annoyed sneer.

"Yeah, Rachel, Cameron's hot. Marty's cute I guess. You know you think the same way," Claudia had conceded with a bit of a snort-like giggle.

"You should see if you can get them into a threesome with you," Lora had said.

"That's ridiculous!" Rachel had said, aghast. "One at a time, please."

Suddenly a sharp tone had exploded in Lora's voice, something dire and hideous, something almost uncharacteristic and in retrospect, something Rachel would not have expected even from someone like Lora.

"Oh, I know why you like Marty so much. His daddy died, and since your daddy died too, you see something in him. You relate to him. But he's just using you. You don't know how many times I've heard him talk about how beautiful and hot you are, Rachel. He wants to get you in bed, just like every other guy. He likes your flowing brown hair, your perfect voluptuous chest, and your blue eyes. Those blue eyes. That's all I ever hear guys talk about," Lora had said, thick jealousy. Claudia had edged closer to Rachel.

“You’re always snagging all the hot guys,” Claudia had said with cold cynicism. “I bet you and Marty sit around and talk about how sad it was to lose your daddies. How cute that must be.”

The words still stung hard, and Rachel was still not able to fully comprehend what her friends had said. Had these been the words of friends? She had to stand there for a moment in shock, and mentally was taken aback and had to absorb the harsh jealousy-tainted words. Was she overacting to a joke made by her friends? The words had hurt her too deeply, too sincerely. No, their voices had been steeped with bitter hurtful envy. The words had been angry and out of place; Rachel had thought that she would not stand for this. They had no right to bring Rachel’s father into this. How could her friends have felt like that? How could they say such things!

Tears had welled up behind Rachel’s eyes; she had to take a deep breath to contain them. As she had drawn in the breath, a quickening wrath had risen within her. She had stepped forward, and had gotten even closer to Claudia, with an unquenchable hatred that had been present in her eyes. She had directed her jewel-like blue eyes towards Claudia with purified inner anguish. Her words had been quick and filled with fury.

“You don’t know what it’s like to lose your parents. You don’t know anything about caring for people, because you have everything you’ve ever wanted. You’re conceited snobs, like Cameron. He’s the same. You’re all used to getting whatever you want, and abusing whatever you have. Well, Marty’s not like that. He loves what he has, and appreciates the small things too,” Rachel had said, and had curled her lip. A single tear had rolled down her cheek, and she had turned away from them and had started towards the sliding door on her right. Beyond the glass gateway to the outdoors, the deck had been shrouded in shadow by a very large tree. She had stormed towards the glass door. Marty had been consumed by his conversation with Cameron. He had not seen Rachel’s reddened frustrated face on its approach.

Lora and Claudia had looked at each other with serious concern. They both had stood up. The thought had seemed mutual between them: perhaps they had gone too far. In that moment, their expressions had mellowed, and they had appeared remorseful. They had not wanted Rachel to make a fool of them in front of Cameron, or Marty, or any attractive male.

“Rachel, we’re sorry,” Lora had begun. “We didn’t mean—.”

Their words had gone to the wayside, and Rachel's back had been facing them. She had slid the door open and stepped onto the deck. She did not bother to close the door behind her, but in a flurry of emotion, she had walked up to Marty and wrapped her arms around his left arm. Marty and Cameron both had ceased their conversation abruptly and had turned to address Rachel's sudden burst onto the scene. Absorbed by her emotions, Rachel had kissed Marty on the cheek, had closed her eyes, and cuddled her head to his shoulder.

Momentarily, Rachel had opened her eyes and realized everyone was nervously staring at her. Lora and Claudia had been standing between Marty and Cameron. Cameron had been unaffected by Rachel's display of hurt feelings. He had nonchalantly flicked away his cigarette into a cup (very uncouth!), as he had been leaning back on the railing of the enclosed deck. Marty had instinctively stroked the fingers of his left hand through the light brown strands of Rachel's hair.

"I'm sorry," Rachel had said, and she had glared at Lora and Claudia, who had changed their expressions as soon as Rachel spoke. Lora had shaken her head and smirked at Claudia, who had been rolling her eyes. To Rachel, it had seemed that they were scheming. Their minds always had always worked in tandem. Rachel remembered trying continue to explain herself, perhaps with futility. "I didn't mean to disturb you guys out here. It seemed like you two were pretty heated about something, but I just had to get some fresh air and clear my head for a minute."

"Oh, it's alright. I think we've said enough here," Marty had said, as he glared at Cameron resolutely.

"Quite," Cameron had said, as he had smiled with a sneer. An uncomfortable bitterness had cut the air like a knife, such that the air still wreaked with its stench now as Rachel took another hit from the clove cigarette. What could cause two age-old friends to confront each other with such disdain?

"I'm going to hang out with my girlfriend now, if you don't mind, Cameron," Marty had said very matter-of-factly, with a tinge of spite. Provocation had filled his voice; it seemed that he had been trying to anger Cameron, but Cameron's countenance had remained dauntlessly unwavering. That sneer, a devilish smirk, had never left his expression.

Cameron had eased towards Rachel like a slithering snake and had ran the back of his hand across her cheek. Marty then angrily grabbed Cameron's wrist and threw it back. Cameron's eyes had widened,

and his had mouth dropped. He then touched his wrist with his other hand, and had looked at Marty like an insect that had just bitten him.

“Get out of here,” Marty had said with violent intent, as his voice had been wavering and his eyes had been glaring darkly at Cameron.

“Alright, Marty. I’ll leave you to your little whore,” he had returned with contempt. His expression of shock and hurt quickly had turned to laughter. He had stepped back towards Lora and Claudia. They had chuckled lightly. Marty had shot a disapproving look their direction. Without thinking, the girls had gravitated quickly to Cameron’s side. Cameron had smiled confidently and looped his arms around both of theirs. Lora and Claudia had been taken off-guard by Cameron’s open gestures. They had looked at him, frozen by his touch, and had waited for him to move.

“I believe I’ll be on my way,” he had said confidently. Lora and Claudia had been giddily petrified as they looked each other. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Ummm, no no,” Lora had said, feeling the chills run up and down her spine. She had been unable to resist Cameron’s touch; it was as if she had been drugged when Cameron had been speaking to them.

“Ha, no,” Claudia returned. Lora and Claudia giggled again. Claudia glanced at Lora, smiling girlishly. Cameron knew he was aggravating Rachel and Marty.

“Let’s go find some fun, and get away from these bores,” Cameron had said. The girls had laughed, lavishing in the attention brought on by Cameron. Marty had only stared at Cameron, and had watched him intently. He had walked over to the stairs that lead off the deck towards the other side of the house. Before Cameron had started down the stairs, Marty had spoken.

“Cameron! I’m done with you. I don’t want to see you around anymore, especially around Rachel,” he had said, as he had Rachel tightly at his side. Like a frightened child in its father’s arms, Rachel had released all her tensions and had found comfort in Marty’s arms.

“That’s fine, Marty, my old friend,” Cameron had said, as he had looked behind himself sauntering down the stairs with the giggling girls. He had moved towards a sidewalk that wound towards the front of the house. “Just remember what I told you.”

Cameron had winked and gave a final chuckle. Marty had grimaced painfully and had looked away from Cameron in disgust, as if he had been a hideous monster whose sight he could not bear.

Cameron had come to the end the wooden stairs, had turned, and then had nodded at Marty. The girls had been giggling hesitantly, looking back just as Cameron did, but had been quickly tugged along by the charming swoon that Cameron draped over them. They had finally gone, with only the giggles of the two girls heard in the distance.

\* \* \*

A distinct chirping distracted Rachel and broke her from replaying the scene in her mind. Lora's and Claudia's bitter comments were fresh in her thoughts. That had enraged her, but now she only felt pity for them. She could almost still hear Lora and Claudia, as if their laughter made an imprint on the very air. The very flavor of their words still seemed present.

Rachel sighed and squinted as she stared up into the sky. There were purples and oranges and reds that conglomerated together to form a swirling effect. Each sunbeam possessed its own sense of destiny as they bounced off the puffy clouds. 'It looks like rainbow sherbet,' Rachel thought. It was as if the clouds called her to come visit heaven. But here Rachel stood upon the Earth, in defiance of the heavens. She grinned at the clouds and spotted some small shifting creatures within them. A bold knight with a flaming sword! Yes, that's certainly what it was: a heavenly knight standing in front of a great gate. Or was it a hairy beast from some monstrous fairy tale? Rachel wondered if others would have seen the creative shifts in clouds like she did. If only she could have flown like the tiny red bird and soared with the great golden knight of the gate in the skies.

Rachel took another deep drag from the cigarette. A cool breeze nipped her arms and licked her hair. The cigarette smoke caught a breeze and was blown into the typical neighborhood full of myriad homes. It was an upper middle class neighborhood, and the houses were larger than most, but only a few blocks away were small houses and tiny ranch homes. There was little poverty here, and it was purely a residential area. Everything had that clean new feeling, as if the neighborhood had just been built.

The air was spiced with the flavor of a hearty steak smothered in a tangy sauce, as was common during summer time. Indeed, the smells of savory meats rose into the air; homeowners were busy barbequing and grilling throughout the neighborhood. Rachel loved the summer. Everyone around her was relaxed and delighted that the summer had arrived. It was always a time of excitement and vacations and time off from school.

Despite the general delightful feeling present everywhere, Rachel's thoughts drifted back once again to the event of an hour ago. Rachel could not stop contemplating what had just happened. Although immersed in nature and her surroundings, recent events could not be ignored. They were playing out in her mind like a piece of film, spinning over and over upon the reel. Cameron's glances disturbed her; Lora and Claudia acted like some caught up concubines. 'So typical of their superficiality', Rachel thought. She wondered how she ever became friends with them.

As much as she despised the others at this moment, and was wrestling with that emotion, Rachel also simultaneously felt an burning love for Marty. He had only left a short time ago, just after Cameron and the girls. It felt like an eternity already. She could still hear his voice echoing in the recesses of her mind. No, Rachel had to forget about him. He had left; he was gone. At least he would be back to claim her again. Rachel closed her eyes hard and shook her head. She took another drag on the cigarette, trying to forget, trying to block it all out. But no matter what she did, the only thing on Rachel's mind was Marty and how worried he had been.

## Chapter 2

### Confessions And Dreams

It had been only moments ago that Marty had looked at Rachel on the deck. His smell was still fresh on her, and the cologne was poignant as ever. The taste of his lips was still there; it was heavy and thick, like a great weight had been placed on her lips. The clove cigarettes could not rid her of this taste. Even if Rachel had washed her lips, it would not erase this feeling. He was still with her, right there. She could not dispel his presence. She closed her eyes and saw him again mere minutes before.

Marty had looked at Rachel. She had peered back into his dark eyes, but there had been utter sadness in them. Marty had been holding her on the deck, but finally had released her as if it was too painful stand up anymore. He had scuffled back inside the room, and had sat down on the couch near the grandfather clock with his head in his hands on his knees.

Rachel's hurt quickly had turned to genuine concern for Marty. She walked back into the room, closing the glass door behind her, sitting next to Marty and placing her arms on his back.

"What's wrong? What did Cameron say?" she had said. Marty had then glanced up at Rachel. He had gulped hard.

"Cameron told me..." Marty had tried to say, but only ended up swallowing again. "He said that he was *with* you."

Rachel had felt as if ice crept up into her very veins and that they had frozen her in place. She had been unable to move. 'Caught!' she had thought. 'He knows.' Her mind had been racing. What was she to say? Marty had said something again, but she did not hear it. A hundred images of Cameron's face had flashed through her mind. Seduced by the suggestion of being with Cameron, Rachel had been caught up in a trance. Or had they been repressed memories flooding back? Were things she had buried in her mind being dug up? Her heart had been beating drum that quickened its rumble with every second that expired.

"Rachel!" Marty had said. She then snapped out of her daze. All the features of her body had become taut. Her face had been running wild with creases of tension. "Did you sleep with Cameron?"

Rachel had looked away from Marty and had mumbled something.



“What?” Marty had said. Rachel had looked up, and a single tear has been streaming down her face as a myriad of memories burst forth from her mind. Memories of Cameron holding her, of the lust she felt for him, of the good times they spent together.

“Yes, Marty, I did. We went out, for 5 months. I did sleep with him,” she had said as another tear poured out from the other eye. Guilt had consumed Rachel like a fire in dry leaves. Marty had taken Rachel’s hands in his own.

“Why ... why didn’t you ever tell me that you were with him? He’s my best friend. You knew that, but you both hid the fact,” Marty had said, his voice wavering and uncertain. Rachel had stared at Marty and realized how wonderful he was, how calm he remained even in moments of extreme emotion. She had been barely able utter a word, but had forced herself to cough up some form speech since she had known Marty needed some cool rational response.

“I knew if you found out, you might not even date me. You would never be involved with the girlfriend, even the ex-girlfriend, of your own friend. But I’ve always wanted you more than Cameron,” Rachel had said, having hope she sounded true and heartfelt to Marty’s ears.

“Yes, Cameron seemed to know that. He said that you always wanted me more, that you would never stop talking about me, even though we were just friends back then,” Marty had said.

“I know, I didn’t want you to find out. Can I ask: how did you find out about us?” Rachel had asked, even though she had been afraid of the answer but had been driven by curiosity to ask. Marty had looked down uncomfortably at the floor, flustered, and then had looked back at Rachel. His mouth had been opened, and at first, nothing had come out; he had been trying to find the proper voice of composure in order to explain himself.

“Well, there’s two reasons. One I can explain and the other is kind of weird,” he had tried to begin, but with great hesitation. “Cameron never slipped up; he never told me anything about you and him. He always kept it secret. One time, not so long ago, I was in his bedroom. We were just hanging out. He left for a minute, and I fell on something, I forget what. But I knocked a knob off one of his drawers. So I tried putting it back on, and I opened the drawer. What I found inside were pictures, pictures of you. And poems. Poems he had written to you, things you had written to him. Other things too. A whole collection of

items. I couldn't believe it, and I didn't want Cameron to know that I found out, so I closed the drawer before he came back in. I just set the knob on the floor, hoping he wouldn't notice.

"But it festered in me. I couldn't stop thinking about it, about the fact he was hiding something from me, especially about you. So I confronted him about it, just now out there on your deck. Well, I did talk to him once before too, but he refused to tell me anything. That's why I was getting so angry with him this time.

"So finally he gave in and told me. He told me that he slept with you, that he never forgot about you, and that he was sworn to secrecy never to tell me. But he did tell me about it all. It seemed like he almost enjoyed telling me. I could feel the jealousy coming out of him; it was so thick. I can't explain it. But he's always good with the girls, disgustingly good. He's got that tall dark and handsome thing going. He made it sound like you were just one more conquest for him. I know that's not true, but I ... did question it for a moment, how many guys you've been with that I don't know about. Cameron just laughed at me, and told me that I shouldn't care about things like that, that I should just get over it and move on.

"I wondered though... I wondered why he still had pictures and things of yours. Apparently he hadn't moved on. He was just trying to make me feel bad, maybe even bad enough to split us up. And it all hit me right then. It wasn't anything you had done at all. I looked at that twisted face of his, and I knew that he was trying to get me angry at you. Some friend he was."

Rachel recalled that Marty stopped talking about that point, like he ran out of words to say. Marty had stopped talking. Rachel had been able to feel how sweaty his hands were. She had tried to speak again, but the words had only sounded dumb and weak. She had not wanted to come between Marty's friendship with Cameron, and she had not wanted Marty to think she was some whore. Rachel had been shocked that Cameron had held onto items from their relationship, but that was an entirely different matter. She had to find a way to make Marty feel better; she had to say something that would restore his faith in her.

"I'm sorry about all this, Marty. I've only been with three guys ever. And you know about the other one. I didn't tell you about Cameron, but he was your best friend. It was wrong of me to lie to you. I don't want to come between you and Cameron," Rachel had said, wondering still if those were the right things to say, as if Marty would somehow magically be all better. She had been trying to apologize and beg forgiveness, but she only now realized that Marty's thoughts were lost. His expression had been elsewhere;

he had not cared if Rachel wanted forgiveness or not, not in that moment. It had appeared that was the least of his concerns.

“Well,” Marty had begun in a spacey voice. “Like I said, there were two reasons I knew about you and Cameron. One was the stuff I found in the drawer.” Marty had cut himself off and had been trying to compose himself again.

“Oh, what was the other reason then?” Rachel had said, slightly confused and alarmed by Marty’s hesitation. Marty had looked at her with sadness once again. A certain fright had grown on his face, something that had run shivers up Rachel’s spine. His eyes had blackened, and his sweating skin had become very pale.

“Well,” he had said. “How do I say this? Somehow, I knew that you slept with him. Somehow I knew before I found the stuff in Cameron’s drawer.”

“What do you mean?” Rachel remembered asking. Marty then looked at Rachel, and a sheepish horrific darkness had passed over his face, thickening his fear.

“I had a dream about it. But this wasn’t just any dream. It was not something I could wake up from. The dream started, and you were there in bed with him, but I was forced to watch. I could see Cameron smiling at me, even though he was focused on you. His eyes were red, so evil and red, fiery. His gaze was locked on me. And he defiled you. It wasn’t just love-making or sex, it seemed to somehow be evil, malicious. It’s hard to explain exactly; it was just a feeling. Yet you were totally caught up by him, and you didn’t even notice I was right there. He taunted me, laughed at me. But something else was there. Someone, something, I dunno. There were people in my dream, horrible people all watching me. They hated me. And I felt this evil presence. Something was trying to hurt me.

“Then I opened my eyes. I rubbed my eyes, and looked to the side of my bed,” Marty had said, as he had been gripping Rachel’s hand tightly. “I sat up, and I saw Cameron right there with some other being, some creature. They laughed at me. Right there in my room. I screamed, waking up, half in a dream, half awake. My aunt and uncle came running into my room, but Cameron and the creature were gone. I told them I just had a really bad nightmare. But I knew that Cameron was doing something to me, something evil. I couldn’t describe it, until I found the pictures of you. He hates me simply because I have your

affection and he doesn't. It's really that basic. He's just jealous. And I knew right then that he was evil. Something is horribly wrong with him."

Marty had paused for a moment, and had looked into Rachel's blue eyes.

"And more than that, something else was there with him. It didn't look like a person," Marty faltered and stopped talking. Rachel was scared and captivated all at the same time. What a frightening dream.

"What did it look like?" Rachel had asked. Marty then gulped.

"A giant snake. A giant evil snake. It's one of the scariest things I've ever seen. I mean, it was just a dream. But it was so real, so awful. It haunts me. I can barely sleep. I haven't had the dream since then," Marty had said. "But I see that image in my head. I can't get rid of it, like some kind of curse or something. You probably think I'm insane."

"No, you're not insane. It's just a nightmare. It's weird, but just a dream," Rachel had said, trying to console him. But was there something wrong with Marty? Was he really going insane? Perhaps hiding her relationship with Cameron from him had more of an effect than she thought.

"I'll never hide anything like that from you again, sweetheart," Rachel had said. She had decided to plant a kiss on his cheek. "I love you." Marty's gaze had still been elsewhere when Rachel spoke, and he had not seemed to care that Rachel had been desperately trying to apologize.

"Cameron was out of it, surreal, evil. I wouldn't be surprised if he tried to get you back, somehow, if he tried to take you away from me. He's got this influence, like some power, over girls. I can't describe it. He's always had those looks and that way with words, but now it's like he has help from *something* else," Marty had said. Marty's entire face had been dripping with sweat. He had stared into the space right in front of him, and had strongly clasped Rachel's hands. It had been as if the image of the snake stood there before him.

"Ha, something else? Like a big scary snake?" Rachel had said, running her hand through Marty's hair. She had chuckled slightly. She had to lighten the mood and get Marty's mind off of this dream. Marty had laughed and tried to smile, but he had clearly been disturbed. His breathing had become erratic, and he was shaking, as Rachel recalled.

“Yeah, it’s silly, I know,” Marty had said, shivering for a moment. Marty stopped shaking as if he snapped back into reality. He smiled wryly and had turned to look at Rachel, and had twisted his head around as if a gnat had been flying around him.

“You know I do want you more than Cameron. I never told him that, but it’s true,” Rachel had said. She then smiled and had touched Marty’s face.

“I just don’t trust Cameron,” Marty had said, and he looked back at Rachel’s blue eyes. “But I do love you too.”

Rachel had melted right there into Marty’s arms, and she had bent in to kiss him fully on the lips. Marty had held Rachel’s face, and had kissed her more passionately. Suddenly someone had knocked on the interior door. Rachel and Marty had both jumped as Rachel’s aunt had burst into the room.

“Rachel! Dinner will be—,” she had begun, but she had been looking at Marty and Rachel on the couch. “Oh, excuse me.”

“It’s alright,” Rachel had said, rolling her eyes, folding her hands on her lap.

“Yes, dear, dinner will be ready soon. I just wanted to let you know. Will Marty be staying?” she had said politely but with undertones of agitation. Marty then stood up and walked towards Rachel’s aunt, sensing that it had been time for him to go.

“No, it’s ok. Thanks though. I’ll be on my way,” he had said, looking back at Rachel uncomfortably. Rachel’s aunt had nodded complacently, and she had walked back into the house. Rachel then leapt from the couch and had kissed Marty’s lips again.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then?” Rachel had said.

“Well, I have to leave for a while. I’m going to California to visit my mom,” Marty had replied.

“Oh, that’s right,” Rachel had said. She had looked sad momentarily. Rachel had known that Marty often took these trips to California, and always wondered what they were about, but never had managed to ask Marty. Marty’s eyes had softened as he looked at her and smiled.

“I’ll miss you!” Marty had said. For a moment, her blue eyes had brightened, and she kissed Marty again. Marty had hugged her. He had opened the sliding glass door and departed, walking down the same path Cameron had gone down only moments before.

Rachel's mind snapped back to the present, and her cigarette was burning down to ashes. Her aunt was probably still waiting for her to come inside. But her thoughts still lingered on these events, and she could not banish them from her mind no matter how hard she tried. The same bird she had seen an hour ago flitted about once again, as if appearing out of nowhere, and chirped one final loud tone, and then departed from the yard, flapping its wings hard and soaring into the distance. Rachel dreamily watched the willful bird and still reflected on all that had transpired.

What an odd little soap opera they had concocted together, Cameron, Marty and Rachel. A maddening love triangle. But there were so many odd things that Rachel could not put her finger on. Cameron had acted so strange, and her friends were so rude. Even though Lora and Claudia were pretty shallow, their recent behavior was pushing limits even for them; it was as if they were under some kind of spell, as if their lust for Cameron had blinded them. And then there was Marty's dream. It was so terribly disturbing. In fact, Rachel would have broken down into tears right now, but her salvation had been Marty's love—

"Rachel!" her aunt yelled out the kitchen window, breaking Rachel's dreamy gaze. "It's time for dinner."

Rachel nodded. She rolled her eyes, sighed, and turned to look at the steps leading up through the back door into the deck. Her aunt yelled at her from the quaint window above with flowery curtains. Rachel's aunt would never let her enter through the kitchen door; it was a forbidden entrance. To reach the kitchen, Rachel would have to trot across the deck, through the backroom, the family room, and finally the basement.

Rachel leaned into the railing of the steps like an old fashioned movie star. Marty's smell was still on her. Every breath she took had something of Marty in it. She loved Marty's affection, his calmness, his unwavering desire for her.

Rachel looked into the shadows that fell on her body. Rachel stared down at her body, marveling at its tight shape in the crimson glimmer of sun cast shadows. Quite simply, she was gorgeous. She was short in height, but this only amplified her stark beauty. It was not narcissistic to Rachel; she simply knew her body was lean and her features were shapely. She had curves and could use them. Her aunt had always

said she 'had the devil in her'. She could be a seductress, a brunette seductress with blue eyes that could tear down any man in her path.

Rachel was never short on confidence. There was always an alluring twinkle in her eye and she loved feeling sexy. The man whom she lavished all her attention towards could not resist her, and she knew this. She knew that she had a powerful influence on the opposite sex, but rarely did she use it. She teased and provoked, but never meant any harm. She was always aware when to pull away, but if she wanted, she could entrance a man. She giggled slightly; that's how she had first attracted Marty, as a tease.

Rachel looked deep into the shadows and analyzed the dark shapes with the utmost scrutiny. Just like the clouds far above, the shadows possessed an equal fascination. The shadows were the embodiment of all that was dark, silent, and foreboding. But Rachel found the shadows strangely alluring. If the clouds were heavenly knights, then the shadows were mists of darkness that reigned in evil. The shadows remained damned and crushed, sentenced to eternity beneath the light. But it seemed, in their waiting, the shadows were always ready to combat the clouds. They were the underdogs of the Earth, the most underestimated forces spawned from light.

And now the shadows crept slowly up Rachel's body like a massive blanket that was being draped over her entire form.

'Since I can't touch the clouds, I guess the shadows are mine to deal with,' she thought, reaching out to touch them with her hand. She smiled and chuckled. Her thoughts turned momentarily towards Marty and Cameron. What were Marty or Cameron compared the shadows and all these natural things around her? They were just men. She could easily manipulate and control them, if she wanted. Rachel knew this was conceit, but it made her feel good to think that she was somehow superior. Odd as it was, Rachel almost felt like she owned the shadows; after all, they were right here, unmoving, staring back at here, almost waiting for her command. She sighed deeply, heaving her chest. 'Ha! Men, just like shadows, are mine.' How playful a thought it was!

Suddenly, a voice burst forth from inside her mind with the same determination and brilliance as the care-free chirping bird.

"Rachel, remember, you are special, you are a gift to this earth, to nature, to the very essence of the changing world," the voice in her head echoed. Rachel frowned at the shadows; were the shadows

themselves speaking to her? She looked down at her body again, and instantly she felt shame. She felt shame that she had been so attracted to the dark things and not the light. She felt shame that she had thought of herself as some Lord of Men, some Goddess of Attraction. She closed her eyes hard and opened them quickly. In the white flash that appears on the retina for a split second, Rachel saw an image of her mother smiling at her.

Rachel breathed heavily and looked deep into the shadows again with a slight crease in her brow. Her eyes widened, and she could not pull them away from the darkness of the shadows. A surreal and sensual intuition alerted her to every movement in nature, as if she was outside of time itself and possessed in a moment of stillness. The smoke of the slowly dying cigarette twisted up into the clouds like a great slow-moving plume. Her mouth dropped a little bit. The moment would not end; awareness pervaded her body, and she was connected to nature sensually and directly. Rachel jumped as her aunt's voice rushed through the twilight again, breaking her moment of stillness.

"Rachel! Come in or your dinner's going to get cold. How often do I make dinner for you? Never! So I think you should actually come in and take advantage of it," Rachel's aunt yelled. Reality came back in flurry, and her expression hardened instantly. The sensitivity of her countenance and acute awareness of nature disappeared, and she was Rachel once again. All that had been Rachel the deviant shadow-girl, lord of others, had disappeared. Rachel took a final puff of the cigarette and then threw it to the ground, stubbing out the sizzling butt with her strapped on black shoes. She put a mint in her mouth and walked up the steps of the deck. She rushed through the backroom, the family room, and the basement. At last, she entered the brightly colored kitchen.

On the kitchen table were three plates: one for her uncle, one for her aunt, and one for her. The kitchen was just about as typical as the neighborhood surrounding her. It sickened Rachel. She looked at the food on the plates and saw a filet minion steak on each. 'Wow, fancy,' she thought. There were also three baked potatoes on the plates. Her aunt was washing her hands at the kitchen sink. It was rare for them to all eat together.

"Rachel, I know you like filet, now sit down and enjoy this," her aunt said with her back to Rachel. Rachel shook her head and bitingly creased her eyebrows. The air was filled with a sweet poignant smell.



“I’ll enjoy it as much as you enjoy smoking,” Rachel retorted. Her aunt turned around abruptly with two hands behind her back. She probably disposed of the joint she was smoking in the sink, but Rachel could not see. Finally, her aunt turned towards Rachel with a critical expression.

“Listen, you sit down and eat. Your uncle will be down in a minute,” she said. She looked Rachel up and down. “And why don’t you wear some real clothes. That black skirt is too tight, and that frickin t-shirt shows off too much of your chest.”

Rachel rolled her eyes and sat down. She picked at the steak with the fork. She shoveled the food into her mouth, trying to devour it as fast as she could. She wanted to be done before her uncle came in. She was scooping up the last few remains of the baked potato when her uncle entered the kitchen and kissed her aunt.

“Hey, Rachel, enjoying this wonderful meal your aunt made for ya?” he said, smiling wholeheartedly. Rachel smiled wryly, tilted her head, and nodded.

“Oh, um, definitely,” she said sarcastically. Her uncle shot her a glance and shook his head. He chuckled.

“Now now, Rachel, c’mon, your aunt went to a lot of trouble,” he said.

“Yeah. Yeah! I know. That’s why I ate it so fast,” she said, stuffing the last few bits of baked potato into her mouth. She pushed the chair away from the table and rose from her seat. She had to get away from them; their selfish carelessness infuriated Rachel. This well-cooked meal was delivered to her like a sword to the belly, with no consideration for the organs within. Rachel hoped she would not get indigestion. She quickly rushed to her room before her aunt or uncle could stop her. She bolted up the dozen stairs, nearly tripping. She shut the door behind her, and sat down on her bed. Rachel felt trapped, unable to catch her breath.

Everything around her was so fake and unreal. The room was cheery and pink and girly; this may have been fine when Rachel was younger, but it simply was not her style anymore. She knew her aunt kept her bedroom pristinely clean, just like she did with every other part of the house. Rachel sighed and sat down on her perfectly made white-sheeted bed. She looked down at the blue carpet, placing her hands on her knees. She gazed towards a drawer underneath the nightstand next to the bed. Rachel edged towards the drawer and opened it. She produced a locket and clicked it open.

A smiling blue-eyed bald man stood next to a beautiful golden haired woman. Rachel smiled and clasped the locket to her heart. On the back of the locket was the inscription: Our Blue-Eyed Angel - Rachel Lydia Potastriali. Her father's blue eyes stared back at her like gems embedded in the locket. Those eyes were her eyes. It was as if someone cut the gems loose and soldered them to Rachel's sockets. Wetness came forth to Rachel's eyes, and she sobbed gently. How could Claudia and Lora so callously degrade her father? They had never even known him

With the locket in hand, Rachel rushed to the window on the other side of the bed and lifted it up, peering through the screen into the shadows. The sun had almost completely set by now. Rachel squinted to find shadows below, hoping perhaps to see or hear her mother again. Maybe the shadows would possess her again. Maybe she would be taken to that moment of stillness so far away and distant from her life. She wished she did not live with her aunt; she wished Marty was not going away, and most of all, she feared Cameron now. She feared that he had an unthinkable obsession with her. No, she could not think about these things anymore; they would drive her mad. Rachel squinted harder. She desperately wanted to see, to hear, her mother again. Could Rachel's mother be out there, waiting to help her?

After frantically searching the shadows, Rachel finally sat down on the edge of the bed, still holding the locket in her hand. Rachel would have cried, but it seemed the well of tears inside her had dried up. She longed to hear the echo of her mother's voice, but as long as she waited, the sound never came. She tried to force her eyes open but eventually darkness overcame her, and her head fell to the pillow. Her eyes started to waver, and Rachel Potastriali slowly drifted into a deep slumber.

### **Chapter 3**

## **The Path To Paradise**

Rachel broke out of sleep, sitting straight up. She looked at the red digital numbers of the clock on her dresser. 5:30 AM. Sleep had been a mistake; Rachel did not want to fall asleep and was shocked that she had slept almost all night. The sun was rising now and poured in through the window with the warmth of a new day. She quickly got off the bed and realized the locket was still clasped in her hand. Had she slept like that all night?

Rachel approached the pink bathroom around the corner from her bedroom without an ounce of the typical blariness that accompanied the usual rise from deep sleep. Rachel stopped dead in her tracks on the way to the bathroom and stared at the locket still in her hands. She latched the locket on a sylvan chain around her neck and quickly washed herself, putting on some perfume and hair spray. Rachel fiddled with the locket, touching its smooth surface. The locket seemed to hold a secret that Rachel could not figure out, some mystical solution to all of her problems. Rachel suddenly felt a strange pulling sensation, an extraordinary calling. She knew what she had to do; she knew where she had to go. Even though Rachel could not tell the source of these thoughts, she knew that it was time to leave, as if beckoned by the shadows of the new day.

At 6 AM, Rachel rushed out of the house and ran down the street, away from the cozy neighborhood into the haze of the oncoming dawn. A graveyard was a short distance away, and Rachel knew she had to go there. The dew was still fresh on the ground; it was just as fresh as the rising sun in the purple sky. Rachel finally reached the graveyard. Out of breath, she scaled the metal fence easily and ran in between the scattered gravestones that speckled this lush wood. It did not matter that she was out of breath. She moved forward; she had to reach her impending destination. The steamy morning air of the summer time pumped through her lungs while the surroundings blurred.

She navigated through the graveyard like a lost puppy that instinctively returned home. The stones were almost pointing to her forward, showing her the way. The Earth itself was on Rachel's side. The rising sun behind the trees was blocked except for a few rays that poked through as if to say, "Here, Rachel, this is your path". Rachel collapsed on her knees in front of two gravestones. Withering flowers rested in front of each gravestone, one labeled Jonathon Christopher Potastriali 1952 – 1995 and the other Martha Eva

Potastriali 1954 – 1995. Rachel looked around as sunbeams roughly pierced through the fog evaporating from the ground. Tears streamed down her face almost instantly, but she did not realize why she was here. Like the unrestrained red bird flying through the late afternoon sun, Rachel possessed will but no purpose; she fluttered aimlessly throughout the newly risen day.

Her heart pounded, and that moment of stillness possessed her again. Rachel wanted to hold onto it. She squinted as beams of light cast bold dark shadows underneath the changing sun. Rachel would not have been surprised if a figure jumped out from behind the trees and started dancing amongst the woods like some mystical elf. The leaves fell from the trees, and the birds chirped with that same incredible stillness. Rachel lingered in this moment, afraid to move, afraid that she would disrupt the perfect tranquility all around her.

A hand touched Rachel's shoulder. She turned around quickly and bolted away from the hand. Instantaneous fear seized her like vice grips. She fell back onto her side like a hurt animal and edged away from a shadowy man towering over her.

Eerie beams of light pervaded the mist and fell upon the man's head. The light emboldened gray strands running through his thick wavy shoulder-length hair, giving it a shiny gloss. The man's eyes were set deep in his head on a face that bristled with the recent growth of stubble hair. He wore a long black leather jacket. Underneath the jacket, his clothes were tight to his form. The tiny beams of light stood around him like soldiers, accentuating his ominous form.

Just when it seemed that the man would never speak, a deep brooding voice resonated from him.

"A girl with the eyes of ancient gems has wandered into the wood. You must be the one," he said. "You must be the chosen one."

"What? What are you talking about? Who are you?" Rachel said in horror, picking herself up but still edging away from him. The man was at least one foot taller than her.

"My name is Domino Belliano. I have come to speak of destiny, your destiny. I am here to dazzle you with wonders, the likes of which you have never seen," he said with dignified wonder. Rachel slumped closer to her mother's grave. This was all Rachel needed; didn't she have enough trouble? Maybe somewhere deep inside, she hoped that her mother would come back from the dead to protect her. After all,

look at this man; he could have indeed risen from the dead himself! Beneath her feet, there was a crackle, and she realized that she had slid over the withering flowers in front of the grave, crushing them.

“Don’t be frightened. I have something to show you,” Belliano said benevolently, as he smiled. A calm expression spread across his countenance, brightening the horror he initially instilled in the teenager. Even though warmth pulsed from the man, he was still full of dusky darkness.

He reached out a hand, and beckoned Rachel deeper into the graveyard. The tears had dried on Rachel’s face, creating a sticky moist feeling. But she could not move from that spot next to her mother’s grave. The stone protruding from the ground soothed Rachel, charming her to a seemingly secure state of mind.

Belliano knelt down next to her with his hand still outstretched. Rachel gave a tiny yelp, but courage overcame her, and she looked up into Belliano’s eyes. They seemed to glow with a grayish azure luster. She was moved by their beauty. It was as if they were made of clouds. Like some gentle reaper, he tempted her to enter into his world where the soldier beams of light stood.

“My darling,” the deep voice soothed. “You are so beautiful. Look at you here, frightened beyond belief. What do I look like to you? Some spirit that rose from these very graves?” He laughed. A smile brightened on Rachel’s face a bit as she accepted how silly her fears sounded. This man appeared harmless, but Rachel’s reason told her not to trust him. She felt a sudden urge to rise up and run away, but any movement away from this stone tripled her fears.

“Let us walk,” he said. She did not want to get up; after all, every child knew that you shouldn’t talk to strangers. But there was something fantastic about Mr. Belliano’s blue-gray eyes, about his darkened form, and his calm demeanor. Had this man come out of the shadows to show Rachel around the mystical wood? No, that was a fairy tale! Inevitably, Rachel felt the reigns of curiosity take hold. Belliano smiled.

“You’re staring into my eyes, as if you’ve seen something familiar, something reflected in yourself. I have so much to tell you. Please, will you walk with me?” he said. His vague riveting words flowed through the moisturized air with a tone that could soothe even the most savage creature. There was a gentle, commanding nature to his beckons. Any person would have been seduced to follow him. Indeed, *any* person would simply be seduced, but Rachel felt an attraction to this man. In fact, he was

uncontrollably enticing like a magnet that she was oddly drawn to. The more she stared at him, the less she feared him.

‘Ah, screw it,’ she thought with a deep pit of anticipation forming in her stomach.

The eyes tell more about a man than the way he acts or what he says. Behind Belliano’s eyes, there was a great pain and immense mystery. Something was hidden, and Rachel the deviant, adventurous shadow-girl, wanted to know his secret. After all, what did she have to lose? Life? Happiness? She did not have any of those as it was. Why not play with the shadows and the dark things? In a brave motion, Rachel grabbed onto Mr. Belliano’s weathered hands and used them to stand up. Rachel summoned the cutest of voices that she could find, wondering how Belliano would react.

“Where are we going, Mr. Belliano? I’m a little girl all alone here,” she said, now managing to conjure up a great grin. Her heart pounded so loud that she thought this man must surely hear it. Mr. Belliano laughed, and with that laugh, every fiber of Rachel’s body uplifted, like being broken out of some dreadful spell. The laugh echoed and pulsed through the woods.

“A little girl all alone unable to defend herself in this frightening graveyard? I doubt you are as defenseless as you imply!” he said, chuckling in his deep tones. “Though a person such as myself might frighten even the most fearless men. But I see a fearless heart within you that surpasses mere men and women. But also, I see pain! Ah...” he said sadly. “So much pain for a little girl.”

Rachel’s gaze turned towards the gravestone for a moment, and she sighed.

“Yes,” she said with a far-off glance. Belliano spoke again.

“Walk with me, and let me take away your pain and show you a path that you’ve always been meant to take,” he said, smiling in an amiable wonder-filled way.

“Well, alright,” Rachel said reluctantly. Her heart beat faster and faster. She rose to stand next to Domino Belliano. She looked into his angelic blue-gray eyes. She stared at him deeply for a moment, trying to confront her fears directly. A great sadness filled Rachel.

“I see pain there too,” she whispered, gazing in amazement like a girl that had never seen eyes before. “I see pain in your eyes too. Let’s walk.”

Rachel offered her arm to Mr. Belliano. He took it without reservation. What a pair they made! Two dignified creatures prancing through the dark gloomy sun-shrouded gravestones. And it was nothing

less than a prance. They smiled and laughed at the simple things such as sunbeams that would pour through the trees and illuminate a bird or a leaf. Or perhaps they stared at a twisted root for a while. Normal, everyday happenings of nature became magnificent marvels for them.

After walking for some time, Mr. Belliano stopped next to Rachel, placed his hands on her shoulders, and stood square to her. Rachel could see the glimmer of playfulness in his blue eyes. His mouth opened and a deep echoing giggle came out. It seemed that when Belliano laughed, the very trees chattered with excitement around him. And so Rachel's excitement was piqued, and she smiled. Swiftly, Mr. Belliano removed his hands from Rachel and turned around, swinging the bottom of his long leather jacket. He walked into the gray mist of the graveyard.

Rachel darted after his flowing leather jacket but had a difficult time keeping up with Mr. Belliano. The long leather jacket glided over the landscape. Mr. Belliano seemed to float through the mist. Rachel chuckled again, and she thought of a fairy sprinkling magic dust throughout the woods. After traveling several hundred yards, they reached a large 10 foot-high stone tomb with a giant cross on top. The trees still blocked the rays of the sun like a shroud, and perpetual darkness surrounded them. It was like they had walked through a stony cavern with images of trees as the walls. A surge of uneasiness rushed through Rachel's body in the form of chills. Belliano produced a key from his pocket, unlocked the giant tomb, and trotted lightly up its stone stairs. Rachel stepped inside, only moments behind Belliano.

Rachel realized this place was no tomb. There were wires and cables criss-crossing everywhere inside the room. A large closet-sized chamber lay in the center of the room; it looked like a telephone booth. Belliano flipped several switches on a control panel near the chamber and fluorescent lights flickered on with a dull hum.

"Now I must explain some things," he said, looking around the room anxiously. "Let me ask you: are you religious?"

"Religious?" Rachel said, thinking that question was unusual. She smiled like a girl in an amusement park, distracted by the glamour of all the technology in the room. "I umm know a little bit about the bible and stuff. I mean, I got sent to CCD when I was younger—"

Belliano flung his arms wildly through the air, and his eyes suddenly lit with a fanatical fire.

“Listen to me! Before the dawn of our days, a supreme being created man and woman, call this being ‘God’ if you will,” he said. Now he whispered in a frightened tone, as if he was paranoid someone would hear him. “Do you know this story? Do you know the story of creation, of Adam, of Eve?”

Rachel nodded, looking down at her body as it trembled. Her smile and allure faded completely. Although Belliano had eased her mind earlier, fear returned instantly to Rachel. Mr. Belliano eased his hand on her shoulder, but a dark ominous disposition replaced the calm smiles and excited chuckles during their walk. A maddening sheen glossed over the beauty in his gray eyes, but his motions still contained great equanimity. His hands motioned eloquently as he explained everything to Rachel.

“Rachel, I come from an old belief, but I have coupled my belief with new ideas. My beliefs are rooted in ancient religions and old mysticisms that tell a thousand stories of creation. The Christians believe it, the Jews believe it; even the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Assyrians knew it was true. Every religion, culture, and race since the dawn of man have tried to explain the creation. Such an incredible fascination man has had with the idea of how they came to be.

“However, it is my gift, my great fore sight, to be able to discern which of the stories is truth. Amazingly enough, the story of creation has been documented. In fact, the story in the bible from the book of Genesis describes creation. It misses certain pieces and lacks, how shall we say, certain nuances, but it does indeed remain close to the truth. It is, how shall we say, an understated summary. And if one chose to look closely enough, it would be discovered that many other theological works support this story of creation. In fact, one would find that all stories of creation subtly tie together,” Belliano went on with passion in a maddeningly intelligent tone of voice. He paused for a moment. Rachel stared and listened, creasing her brow. Somehow, the words he spoke and the way he said them evoked a passion in her. His blue eyes glittered and his hands waved around vehemently, captivating her as if she was in a vast audience and Belliano was the sole performer.

“Yes, yes, go on, Mr. Belliano, I’m listening. I’m not sure what to make of all this, but it sounds like you are telling me all this for a reason,” Rachel said. Belliano chuckled again, but with an edge of insanity.

“How does the saying go? ‘There’s a method to the madness?’ ” he said, a delightfully devious grin spreading across his face. Rachel nodded again, forcing a grin onto her face, though an underlying



fright still gripped her at all moments. Belliano continued, and out of terrified curiosity, Rachel did not move but only listened.

“I could just ask you to read the story from the bible again for me, but time is of utmost importance, so I will paraphrase for you,” Belliano said, clearing his throat, looking down for a moment. When he looked back up at Rachel, the fire still remained in his eyes, and he began to lecture now. The performer he had been turned to educator.

“The first woman, Eve, came from the first man, Adam, as you most likely know. She was made from his flesh. They wandered naked full of bliss within Eden, the garden of paradise. But alas, the first woman ate the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, even though God forbade them. And it was the devil, Satan, who told Eve that she should eat the fruit. He tricked her, and her earthly partner, to eat from the tree from which they were forbidden to eat. Ignorance quickly faded for Adam and Eve, and they were made to know that they wandered naked in the Garden of Earthly Delights. Henceforth, they were cursed and banished from Eden forever; they were sent away from everlasting paradise. It was a simple error of hers that condemned all of mankind to a path of sin and evil. You may think this story is fabrication, fiction, a falsity. But, I assure you, just like I am not a fairy tale monster man from the dark wood, the story is real. It existed; these events happened.”

Rachel’s mouth dropped. She was about to speak, but Belliano held his hand up and frowned slightly to denote a mood of utter seriousness. Rachel sunk back and continued to listen.

“I assure you it is true, a part of history, not a fairy tale, just as I am flesh and blood here before you. I could go on for hours and hours, spewing forth epic upon epic of written theologies. I must tell you now that I am humble of servant of an Almighty higher power. As I said before already, you may call this higher power God if you will. Let me make it clear that I owe my allegiance to God, but at the same time, I cannot deny the truths that make themselves clear to me. I must interfere with the choice of God for the good of humanity. After all, I am gifted with great fore sight and premonition.”

Rachel stepped back, very frightened now, but Belliano moved forward, keeping himself the same distance from her. As Belliano continued to speak, his deepened voice grew in madness and passion, spiraling nearly out of control.

“I cannot ignore the fact that humanity has taken a grave course for the worst, and mostly because of God’s unwillingness to interfere. How many times have humans asked God for help during their wars? How many blood baths could Our Almighty Lord have ended before they started? For millennia, under the skies that our Creator draped over us, men have hated other men. Men have murdered other men. Men have trampled on the rights of every doctrine they ever made, from the first Babylonian code of laws to America’s constitution. Time and time again, God watches idly as men destroy themselves! How can God sit upon His heavenly thrown and disown man so thoughtlessly? How can He watch as the rights of the individual are stripped away?

Belliano smiled and looked at Rachel directly.

“This relates to you too, Rachel. It’s not just something meant for a dry dusty history book. How could our Lord let your pain go on without end? Could not the omnipotence of God help you decide between the love of the old and new males in your life? Yes, you know of whom I speak, Rachel Lydia Potastriali. Do not deny your love for both Marty and Cameron.”

Rachel breathed heavily and looked up at Belliano, aghast by his knowledge. She began to speak.

“I love Marty. I don’t love Cameron. And how... how do you—“

“I know! After all you see here, you question what I say to you. You question! You love both, and despite the fact that you fear Cameron, the evil spawned in him is still alluring. Yes, it is, admit it,” Belliano said.

“Fine!” Rachel screamed back. “I loved Cameron, but now I’m with Marty and that’s the way it is. It’s better that way. What’s your point in all this?”

“Your love is torn and your soul must be cleansed. You need guidance, instruction, someone to help you. If there truly was a higher power, don’t you think He should help you? Don’t you ever wonder if there actually was a being out there like that? Don’t you ever call out to the dead and departed, or even some higher power, for help?” Belliano asked. Rachel’s knees quivered.

“Well, well, yes, I have,” Rachel responded. Belliano’s hands gestured through the air passionately.

“And, lo, what has your answer been? Nothing. What has been the response from the spirit realm? Nothing! Oh, it would seem indeed that God has forsaken you as well, my sweet darling little girl. Granted,

Our Lord is mighty, indeed, but he has ignored the fate of humanity too long. But I am not one of ‘the faithful’ who is content to sit in ignorance. I will not tell people to live good lives, when I know in my heart that one mistake could send a man tumbling towards hell. If I murdered a man on the day of my death without possibility of repent, would I go to hell? Ha, surely I would in the eyes of our Lord, for my actions are wholly unredeemable to Him. Heaven’s gates would lock me out based upon the sins of my soul.”

Mr. Belliano’s face reddened, and he shook his fists. He spoke as a poet would who had too many verbs and adjectives to abuse; he was a cynical historian who had read too many books. Despite that, there was something mesmerizing about the way he spoke his words, and Rachel listened intently now. He had captivated her spirit, her very being. She could not believe all that he knew about her problems and her life, her very soul.

Not only by knowledge of her life, but by the maddening roll of Belliano’s voice and the delivery of his words, Rachel was captivated. It was the passion in his voice, the eloquence, albeit insanity, of his speech. Rachel was petrified with fear, yet simultaneously fascinated beyond words. The contradiction of these mixed emotions created a balance in which she could barely move, save her shaking knees.

Belliano’s fists lowered. His fingers fanned out and smoothed across his leather jacket. His demeanor slowly calmed, but a lit cornea still flared in his eyes. He was about go on.

“You must think that I have great hate for Our Lord, and that I could not possibly be one of his loyal servants. Do not misunderstand me; I don’t hate God. Far from it! In fact, I think that man has been unable to live up to the standards of such a Gracious and Merciful Lord. Man is such a petty creature, really, a lower life form that God barely has enough time to give his full attention. God doesn’t quite know what is best for man. He created man as an infant race, but man is no longer infantile. Man has evolved and grown beyond even His original conceptions! And God doesn’t know what to do with man’s progress. I do not propose to tell you that God is ignorant or stupid. He who created Adam and Eve is all-powerful. Omnipotent, even! But does omnipotence imply perfection? I venture that it does not!

Belliano smiled deviously, and he held his hand out towards Rachel, not as an offer, but pointing at her. He moved closer to her. Rachel could not speak; she was unsure what to make of all this.

“I must tell you a certainty: there is a devil! And this devil is called Satan. He is an evil deceitful creature bent on destroying the likeness of man. Satan was once a powerful angel in the service of the Lord.

But he was cast down from the heavenly throne of God for reasons that I cannot describe now. He became the first fallen angel, and forever after was known as Satan, the great adversary.

“I must digress to tell you something of Satan’s race: the angels. Angels have always been cosmic watchers of mankind, but they cannot interfere directly with humanity. Angels, even the fallen ones, have no free will, you see. They possess many powers, including the ability to exist beyond space and time. But in essence, they are spirit-like creatures forever bound to the will of God. Their only escape comes from interacting with humanity. Any glimpses of freedom and free will are through the perceptions of man. Through the guidance, instruction, and even temptation of humans, angels become empowered and are dragged along with each man’s or woman’s willful action. In fact, it has been known for angels to take physical form and even mate with humans, but that is another story for another time.

“It is the devil whom I focus on, the one I interchangeably call Satan. The first fallen angel, more than any other, hates mankind for their free will and ability to control the earth. This angel thinks the earth should be his realm to dominate. Satan does not understand why God has given man the earth instead. But since the devil is bound to the will of God, he cannot rule the earth without man’s intervention. He has no will of his own to do this, and so he enlists the free will of human-kind through temptation, trickery, and deceit. In this way, Satan advances one step at a time towards rulership of the earth. It is the power of temptation and trickery that makes the devil quite hideous.

“But now, I pose a mind-boggling question to you: if God truly is all-powerful, why does He let the devil walk the earth and cause eternal deceitful mayhem? Don’t you think it is within God’s power to destroy Satan? Of course it is, but God is merciful and allows this evil creature to live freely and accursedly.

“The devil indirectly caused the first trend of misery ever known in human history. I am, of course, referring to the day that the devil tempted Eve to eat the apple in the Garden of Eden, as told in the story of Genesis in the bible. Forever after, mankind was doomed to expulsion from paradise,” Belliano said with fiery completion, as if all his previous points could be summed up in his last statement. A passionate fire still danced in his cornea like a flame within a stone hearth of gray and blue. They almost took on a physical quality. Were this man’s eyes really glowing? They were the brightest blue now! Indeed they were glowing. Belliano still went on, gaining momentum in a fit of insanity.

“But to my point, Rachel. Really, I’m sure you’re sick of hearing me babble, but I implore you to listen further. What if we could stop Eve!” he said with a large proud grin on his face. “What if we could save humanity before it went down the path of destruction and blood shed? What if we could be one step ahead of the devil himself?”

“What? What is it you are saying?” Rachel said, confused and frightened. Truly, Belliano was babbling incessantly. She stared into Belliano’s eyes again, a brilliant blue now, the color of a cloudless sky. The eyes were something she knew well, like a reflection or maybe something from her past, but Rachel could not place it.

“Rachel, I propose something bold to you. Eve can be stopped from eating the fruit, and the devil’s deceit can be thwarted. Man can remain forever in paradise, in bliss. The evils of the world can be revoked forever! And, finally, I come to the point of the matter. I’ve babbled a great deal, I know, probably boring you, but take it all to heart, I tell you! We *can* stop Eve from ever eating that fruit, the fruit of knowledge that would strip her and Adam of ignorance, the grapes of knowledge that inevitably banned them from the Tree of Life and immortality. We can give it back to them!” Belliano continued fiercely.

“Immortality?” Rachel asked, nearly in a panic.

“Yes, a gift or benefit, if you will, for living in the garden of Eden. You live forever in bliss. But without access to the Tree of Life, outside of Eden, you are doomed to inevitably die. We can give humanity immortality and eternal paradise in one fowl swoop!”

Belliano looked down at a control panel and started pressing several buttons. Rachel glanced at the machine in the center of the room. She moved closer to Belliano and looked over the control panel he operated it; his face turned away to look at the ground, but Rachel persisted to glance into his eyes. Those eyes, they were from the clouds! Rachel had seen them in one of her many heavenly cloud knights.

He suddenly turned to her, grabbing her shoulders. Rachel’s mouth dropped.

“Blue eyes! My father’s eyes. My eyes,” she whispered. A sickening pit of fright overcame her and rose in her stomach. She backed away and shook her head. “What is this? I don’t understand!”

“No, heavenly child, come forth and listen! You have listened well so far, and I have something to ask of you! I am old and weary, Rachel. I need your help. There is no one else. You are my chosen one,

you are perfect! You cannot disappoint me,” Belliano cried urgently as he looked around in fright. “You must go back to Eden and stop Eve, before it’s too late and demons of the ancient realms find you.”

“What’s the matter? What’s happening?” Rachel demanded.

“It’s the devil!” Belliano said. His voice became raspy, and he collapsed to the ground on his knees. He cried out in anguish, and reached his hand out towards Rachel. “The devil has already taken a hold of me. His demons will destroy me! He knows about me. He knows about me, and my work! But the devil, Satan, does not know about you!”

Belliano’s eyes filled with a strange glow again, and this time the light in his eyes grew bright and luminous. He slowly sunk towards the ground as he continued speaking.

“The controls are set; just hit the red button and step inside the chamber. It is a gateway to another world, another time, another place. It will take you to Eden. But, whatever you do, don’t forget to take the box next to the controls with you! It is the only thing that can bring you back. Your surroundings may change but as long as you have the box, you will be protected; you will be unaffected by the changes in time and space. This is not unlike time-travel, but there are many differences!”

“What do you mean?” Rachel exclaimed. “What are you—“

Belliano’s back arched, and he winced painfully. He writhed around on the floor, his speech becoming forced; it was agonizing for him to talk.

“You’re my only hope, darling companion of pain, my shadow-girl! Now’s your chance to stop the source of all the pain and suffering that ever sprung up in the world...”

Rachel was utterly distressed by his blatant proposal but had no time to think. Domino Belliano’s body spontaneously combusted without any screams on his part. His eyes shone with a bright blue hue, similar to the blue part of the hottest fires. Rachel fell to her knees and screamed out. Time swirled again, and the stillness of the moment pressed into her being like temporal molasses. The shadows of the room immersed Rachel in a peculiar agony like sharp sticky blankets. The blue hue of Belliano’s eyes grew in brilliance and melded with the images of the clouds Rachel had seen. Belliano’s face suddenly twisted into the form of her father. Was it really him?

“Daddy!” she screamed. The eyes’ blue glow caught her in a trance, and all gray had faded from them. She got to her feet quickly and shook her head with forthright rationality. “This can’t be happening, you’re not my father!”

Belliano’s eyes became a white glow now and his body began to rise into the air as it continued to burn. Belliano raised his arms in a “V” shape. With a ritualistic tone, he quoted these words without paying any attention to the flames engulfing his floating body: “‘Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life’”. With a hissing sound, the flames intensified and burnt away all the skin on his body. Bones crackled in the flames. Organs, blood vessels, and tissue sizzled and exploded. His body melted and dripped into a puddle on the ground. His bones fell like dust. Finally, his remaining carcass fell as sizzling ooze.

Rachel was frozen in her place on the metal floor. Comprehending what happened seemed a distant possibility at this moment. The horror of the death in front of her was utterly staggering, and Rachel was aghast with disgust. The blue eyes of Belliano were so vivid! Her father, those clouds! What did all this mean? Could Rachel really be some chosen one from this earthly realm? Rachel could not explain why she felt so compelled to visit her parents’ grave on this day. Was it her destiny to find this man so she could hear him out? Rachel questioned everything, every purpose. Only time could resolve her problems now.

## Chapter 4

### A Motivational Attack

Rachel looked at the blinking control panel with buttons that meant nothing to her. She noticed the box Belliano had mentioned. She grabbed it instinctively; it seemed like the right thing to do. She looked back down at the bubbling puddle of Domino Belliano's remains on the floor. At first, she was unable to move, but like a sudden switch, her legs twitched and began to carry her away. She felt nauseous, and in a fury of motion fueled by fright, Rachel scrambled out of the tomb and through the woods. Her limbs were fast and fluid, but Rachel's mind was in a place far from reality; any rational thought was momentarily banned. She was scared like some holocaust victim who just escaped persecution from a gas chamber. She scaled the fence after passing through the graveyard and darting by her parents' graves. Only when she completely cleared the graveyard and was on the street did Rachel regain her senses. She moved quickly, and realized that a cold sweat had broken out throughout her entire body. She breathed deeply. She had no memory of the last ten minutes; the trauma was too severe.

One thing was burned into her memory: Belliano's gray-blue-white eyes. His dying eyes. Rachel began to cry. Maybe it was because of the horrors she had just seen, or perhaps she was too frightened to deal with her own reality again after seeing such fantastical events. What was worse: reality or the brutal demonic attack?

She clutched the locket of her parents that hung loosely on the silver chain around her neck, bobbing to and fro as she ran. Rachel's mind was jelly, and she could not focus clearly on the next course of action. Should she tell anyone about what she had seen? Had Belliano told the truth? The fact that he had melted into a fizzy pool of ooze in front of her very eyes could be proof enough that what he said was true. If it was true, Belliano's proposal did not seem very sensible. Carrying out this mythological quest with some crazy dimensional time machine was absurd.

Rachel closed in on her neighborhood. She quickened her pace as she desperately wanted to get home. She needed something that reminded her of reality, something that could ground her. She wished Marty was there. He would at least listen to her, whether he understood or not. After all, she had listened to him about his ludicrous dream and tried to understand it. Nonetheless, Marty might think she had gone totally insane. But who could she trust if not Marty? Anyone else would think she had lost her mind. All



those thoughts were in vain anyway; Marty was gone by now, off to some desert town north of Los Angeles where his family originated.

A voice rang out inside Rachel's mind.

"I believe you, Rachel," the voice echoed. "You're not going crazy."

Rachel tried to shrug off the voice. It sounded distinctly like the voice of her mother, the same voice she strove to find in the shadows before. It was all too real, that voice, these things that had just happened. Rachel wanted them all to go away.

"It is real. Don't worry, I'll be here for you, Rachel."

Rachel stopped moving, and looked around the street. She had entered her neighborhood. She could not see anyone, though she squinted, hoping she could find something, to explain the voice or what she had seen. Rachel shook her head and waited. All Rachel wanted to do was run home and talk to Marty.

She rushed quickly towards her house and walked up the two stone steps at her front door. Still gripping Belliano's strange control box in her hand, Rachel twisted her key in the door, but found that it was already open. 'Odd', Rachel thought. She turned towards the driveway. Both her aunt's and uncle's cars were gone. It was not a school day, but Rachel remembered that her aunt and uncle always go shopping on Sundays. They would be gone for several hours. That still did not explain why the front door was open. Could her aunt have been that careless and actually have left the door open? Maybe the pot had finally gotten hold of her overprotective mind.

Rachel opened the door with a creak, and then it occurred to her that Marty had a key to her house as well. Maybe Marty was here. Maybe he was looking for her, and he had forsaken his Californian trip for her. Rachel's hope piqued momentarily. It was nearly three in the afternoon, and the sun was angled in the fading sky.

Another thought consumed Rachel at this moment. She wanted to validate Belliano's ridiculous story. All this bible talk made Rachel want to pick up the bible and read it again. A certain intellectual fascination took hold of her. She had to figure out Belliano's crazy tale, and get more information on what he said.

Rachel immediately ran up to her room. She placed Belliano's control box on her night stand, and scuffled through several of her drawers, searching for something. She rummaged through book shelves and

finally found a dust-covered copy of King Jame's bible. She swept her hands across the dust of the red paperback book, blowing the particles of dirt away. Naturally, it was a full Christian volume, with added Catholic footnotes. Added boring Catholic footnotes. Rachel had owned this bible since grade school. She flipped the book open to Genesis, the first chapter of the bible, and began thumbing through the verses. She read furiously fast, trying to find a specific quote. She was mumbling the phrases to herself.

She gasped when she came upon Genesis 3:14 :

*"So the LORD God said to the serpent: 'Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life'."*

These were Belliano's words, of course, but Rachel scrunched up her brow in doubt. Belliano could have just read the bible, and used these words along with some strange magician's tricks to conjure up an effect on her. For the first time since her initial fright, Rachel rationally doubted everything Belliano said. These words were printed in every bible, thousands of bibles, and were accessible through books, the internet, and churches. What made Belliano's quoting of these words so special? Some special effects show? Some cheap parlor trick?

No, it was those blue eyes that convinced Rachel. It was the way Belliano acted, his good natured spirit and indomitable passionate will. His very tone of voice had convinced her. And with those brilliant blue eyes, it seemed that anything Belliano uttered was true. Despite all that, doubt still lingered in Rachel's mind. How could the events that transpired possibly be real?

Driven by curiosity, Rachel continued reading and paged back to the beginning of Chapter 3. Her eyes slowed, and her breath quickened as all her CCD classes came back to her, but with much more horror than ever before. She read Chapter 3, Verse 1 aloud:

*"Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?' 2 And the woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; 3 but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.' " 4 Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw*

*that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate."*

Rachel sighed at this fabled prophecy.

"The temptation of Adam and Eve," she said out loud. Her eyes wandered away from the holy book, and she placed the bible on her night stand next to the control box. "Who could ever think these things were real."

Suddenly Rachel started to laugh. It was a consoling laugh that filled the room. She kept laughing until the silly little bible on her night stand was perceived to be a fairy tale book, no more than a collection of Aesop's Fables. She shrugged off the possibility of what Belliano had said, even though a lingering fascination still clung in the depths of her imagination. She felt much better, and the fright faded away. Her rational mind told her what was real. If what Belliano had said was true, then Rachel would have to be insane, and she was certainly not going crazy.

"Hmphh, I'm hungry!" Rachel said, realizing she had not eaten all morning and half the afternoon. She pranced downstairs, remarkably cheery, pretending Belliano and his death were all dreams and fairy tales. Rachel had an uncanny ability to change moods from complete sorrow to utter happiness in moments. She could channel love one moment and flaunt hate the next. She refused to be brought down into sorrow by some strange events that were probably just part of a weird dream. Inevitably, she was an optimist, even during the most traumatic and horrific of occurrences.

"Yes, that's all they were, a dream. Temptation of the devil," Rachel chuckled.

Rachel walked into the kitchen, and before her eyes stood a tall dark long-haired man. His back was to hers as he was bent over in a chair. Rachel tried not to make a sound, but realized she already had. The man turned around.

"Cameron!" Rachel gasped. A gnarled smile appeared on the boy's face. Cameron rose from the chair, rising above Rachel in his lanky height. Cameron's stature cast an imposing shadow upon Rachel. His eyes were black as coal, glaring at her. Rachel must have rushed up to her room so fast that she did not even see Cameron in the kitchen.

"So you forgot, didn't you?" he said. Rachel shook with fearful anticipation.

“Forgot?” she said. “Forgot what?”

“Forgot that I also have a key,” Cameron said, producing a key to Rachel’s home. An image flooded back to her: one year ago, when Rachel dated Cameron and trusted him, she had given him a key to her house. Just like she had given Marty a key to her house. She always trusted too easily, too quickly.

“Yes, I did,” Rachel gulped uneasily. “So, what do you want, Cameron?”

“Mmm, nothing much,” he said, smiling devilishly. His murky form softened, and he slithered closer to Rachel. She took a deep breath and could smell his cologne. It smelled so good. Chills ran up her spine. Cameron smiled that dark yet wildly attractive smile. He touched the back of his hand to Rachel’s cheek. His skin was soft and weathered, almost leathery, like a worn leather jacket. Rachel breathed in deeply. Belliano was right; she never did stop loving him.

“You know I never stopped having feelings for you, Rachel,” Cameron said, looking at her innocently, as the back of his hand slid down her neck, touching the chain on Rachel’s locket. “I fell in love with you, Rachel, but we just never gave it a chance.”

Rachel looked deep into Cameron’s eyes, but she only saw darkness, damnation, and evil. These things radiated from him, and Rachel didn’t even know why she knew this, but she felt it with every fiber of her being. There was no sincerity, there was no love; there was only a drive for lust and possession. The allure was potent, but Rachel could finally see that it was not what she wanted. She placed both her hands on his chest and eased him away from her.

“Cameron,” she said gently. “I have someone else now. I’m sorry.”

Cameron tilted his head in confusion and looked at Rachel as if the words did not compute. Rachel tried to force a smile, and she slowly stepped away. But Cameron’s hand gripped onto the chain of the locket around her neck and pulled her closer. He turned his hand and touched his palm to the chain, gripping it from the front so that Rachel choked. His grasp tightened even more, and Rachel’s eyes bugged out. She pushed away from Cameron. As Rachel thrashed her neck away from him, the chain broke. The locket slid down the chain and slowly flew through the air. Cameron snatched it with his left hand and smiled. He held the locket in one hand and the broken chain in the other.

“You want your man, Marty. I see how it is, you little bitch,” he sneered, flipping his black hair around his head. He clenched the locket in a fist. Rachel felt a fire erupt within her, a consuming anger. He

had the one memory of her parents in his hands, the one thing she held dearest. How dare he! Like teapot that had just boiled over, she launched at him and flailed her arms towards his fist. Cameron dodged to the side, laughing.

“Aw, Rachel can’t get what she wants. Poor little girl,” he said. He threw the broken chain on the kitchen table. Cameron tossed the locket between his hands above her head.

“GIVE IT BACK!” Rachel screamed. Her desperate fury manifested as redness on her face.

“Give it back?” Cameron said, looking down at Rachel with innocence and pity. “Give it back! Would you ever give me back your love? Would you ever give me anything of yours again?”

Cameron blitzed Rachel suddenly and pushed her. He threw her back towards the counter. Rachel’s head hit the counter hard, and she slumped to the floor. She looked up at the massive form looming above her, and tried to regain her stance, but felt disoriented. A sharp pain lulled on the back of her skull.

“Do we live in secrecy like this? Always hiding. Never telling anyone about what we had! No! No more, you little bitch. How does the saying go? If I can’t have her, then no one can,” Cameron laughed, an evil almost inhuman glare in his eyes. He tossed the locket into the kitchen sink. It clanked down towards the drain, and was caught in the strainer. Cameron grabbed Rachel’s chin with his hand and lifted her up so she was upright; she was still woozy and even more paralyzed by his grip now.

“Now, I think I’ll have you one last time,” Cameron said. Rachel looked over at the locket in the sink and cried out. Although dazed, she slapped Cameron heftily on the cheek. A sting tingled on the surface of his skin, and a red mark quickly appeared on his face. Cameron’s expression went wild, and he grabbed Rachel’s hand. She thrust her knee into his groin, and Cameron bent over grunting in pain.

Rachel stumbled over to the sink and snagged the locket into her fist. She shook her head, trying to dispel the disorientation she felt. Cameron came after her, still slightly hunched over. Rachel looked to her left and spied a steak knife. She looked back at Cameron with intense oncoming fear and felt utter contempt towards his acts of violence. Cameron seemed to stand still! Rachel took her chance. She picked up the knife like a sword and slashed Cameron’s face. A distinct chirping could suddenly be heard, and Rachel looked outside the kitchen window above the sink. Slowly, very slowly, the same tiny red bird from

before flew by. Its wings flapped up then down, rigidly, in slow motion. Rachel turned her head back to Cameron and realized blood was dripping from his face.

In a foul burst of agony, Cameron screamed and backed off from Rachel. Holding the locket in one hand and the knife in the other, Rachel lurched towards Cameron, slicing his hand.

“Now get the hell out of this house!” Rachel yelled. “And NEVER take my locket again.”

Cameron whimpered for a moment, breathed heavily, and gritted his teeth like the maw of a wolf. He touched the wound on his face, and rubbed the blood in between his thumb and fore finger. His hair flowed over his face and whipped back again like the mane of a predator lion in the wild.

“You little wench! You slut. You cut me. What is wrong with you?” he said. He rushed towards her and grabbed her neck with his hand, pushing her up onto the counter in one foul rush. Rachel gasped, dropping the locket on the counter. It opened and her parents’ faces stared up at her, smiling. Plain to see were her father’s radiant blue eyes and her mother’s unmistakable golden hair.

In that moment, Rachel jabbed through air again with all her might and sliced through Cameron’s black shirt into his upper right arm. Cameron screamed and released his hold on her, the knife still stuck in his arm. Rachel fell to the ground again, grabbing her throat in pain. Cameron yelled in agony, and painfully wrested the knife from of his shoulder. He gave a grunt similar to a wild boar that had just been skewered.

In this moment, Rachel grabbed the locket and clasped it in her hand. She reached into a drawer and found another knife, a butcher knife this time. Cameron’s eyes were mad, and he lifted the blood-stained knife from his shoulder in the air with his other unwounded hand. He yelled like a great elephant with some kind of knife as a trunk. He began his assault.

She slid away from the counter just in time, as Cameron’s knife slammed into the counter top only inches from her arm. She had to get out of there. Rachel rushed down a flight of six stairs into the basement. She quickly unlocked the back door and ran up into the family room. She only had to climb the stairs into the family room, go through the back room’s sliding door and she would be outside on the deck. Cameron stumbled down the stairs after her, mumbling insults that were indiscernible. He was stunned and wounded. He moved deliberately, but with little accuracy. This did not decrease the danger of his strength if Rachel were to receive a direct blow from him.

She closed the door leading into the family room from the basement, but his hand stopped it and averted her. He threw the door wide open and came at her again with the knife. This time, he crashed into a wall. Rachel scampered backwards up more stairs and opened the door from the family room to the back room. Cameron was only two feet away from her. His expression was dumfounded for a moment, since each of his attacks bore all the strength he possessed and took a great deal of energy. He huffed and puffed. Rachel clambered into the back room. She would have made it out to the deck, but she tripped and fell to the ground. A yelp of frustration escaped her lips.

Rachel looked up and saw the old goat's head on the wall. She could swear that it was tilted on its side. She noticed that the goat's head was angled and ready to fall off the wall. Rachel did not have any further time to think about this, since by the time she got up, Cameron was poised behind her. They stared at each other for a moment, and no words were exchanged. For one brief moment, Cameron's expression softened, and he seemed like a hurt animal.

Then the rage returned, and he dove at Rachel.

Rachel twisted around and took her knife in both hands, jabbing upwards towards Cameron's neck. She pierced the flesh, near his left jugular vein, and sliced towards his Adam's apple. Cameron screamed, and gurgled, choking, trying to raise his knife for another attack, but Rachel kicked him hard in the stomach.

Cameron finally fell back against the door to the family room, dropping the knife with a thud. He tried to speak, but realized blood was rapidly pouring forth from his neck like a river upon which the dam had just broken. He gasped for air, but choked, and could not catch his breath. He fell hard on his buttocks, slouching against the door so that it closed behind him. He gripped his neck with one hand and tried to cover the blood gushing out of his wound. Cameron's other hand reached out towards Rachel with outstretched fingers.

Rachel remained with the bloody knife in her hand, poised like a feline that was ready to jump away at any moment. Rachel did not trust that Cameron was incapacitated. But slowly his faltering breaths slowed, and his hand fell to his side. Cameron's head finally twisted towards the floor, smearing blood on the wall. His head landed in a pool of blood that had built up from his wound.

The horror of what occurred seized Rachel. Realization dawned like a nauseous pit in her gut. Rachel felt as if she was going to vomit everywhere. The room started to spin; she was going to faint. She looked at the locket in her left hand. She looked at the bloody knife in her other hand in disbelief. She could not cry; she could not utter a word. She stared at the bleeding, disgusting form of Cameron in the back room. She could not react. This could not be real, but it was!

What would Rachel do now? The rational mind clicked in, and Rachel had to figure something out. She was a murderer! She had actually murdered someone. Cameron's eyes remained shut, and blood pumped slowly from his neck wound. Rachel started breathing heavily and sweating.

"Oh my god, Cameron!" she said, kneeling down towards his form. Then, she backed away, shaking her head in disbelief. "No! No, why? Why did you—?" but her words cut out. She put her hand to her mouth and the knife in her hand dropped with a metallic thud on the floor. What would she do now? She had to find a way out. Rachel turned away and closed her eyes. Tears streamed out of them, and a muffled scream came forth from her lips. She had been witness to two deaths in such a short period of time. She certainly could not tell anyone, even Marty, especially Marty. The events of Belliano's demonic combustion rushed back into her mind, and it was real once again. Somehow, this new death validated what she had seen before. If one death was possible, then why not another?

Her eyes opened, and the pace of her heart quickened. What would happen, just perchance, that Belliano's rantings were true? She could escape through his special portal. She could embark upon his ludicrous, perhaps even fictitious, quest to save humanity. Bah, none of it could be true, could it?

Rachel darted through her house and ran quickly up the stairs to her bedroom. Rachel grasped the locket so tightly in her hand that sweat seeped from her folded fist. In her bedroom, the bible and control box sat on her desk. She picked up the box, inspecting it closely. It was certainly not like any modern computer she had seen. It had several buttons, and one particularly important looking red button that blinked.

"It's probably just a toy," Rachel said. The image of Cameron's bleeding body came to her mind. "What would it hurt? Things are already insane enough. None of this is probably real anyway. I'll just go back to the graveyard. I have to get out of here! I can't stay here now. I certainly can't stay here, or my aunt and uncle will—."



Rachel's heart skipped a beat as she heard a car door slam outside. Her aunt and uncle were home. She looked down at herself; no blood was on her clothes, but her body and face were caked with sweat. She looked like she had just seen a ghost. Rachel was breathing very heavily and sweating profusely. Suffice it say, she was a mess. Rachel shoved the locket into her pocket, along with the control box in her other pocket.

Rachel ran towards the back of the house, into the back room. Oddly, the goat's head lay on the floor, and had fallen from the wall. Cameron's bloody body was still slouched against the door. She stepped over him and scrambled towards the sliding door, nearly falling again. She looked one last time at the bleeding form of Cameron and ushered the words: "I'm sorry, I did love you once. Good bye."

Rachel unlocked the sliding door and skidded down the wooden stairs off the deck. As Rachel ran down the stairs, a bird cawed loudly to her. This bird was black like a crow and claimed a perch on the railing near the top of the wooden stairs. Then the bird took flight, but fell to the ground quickly as if struck by lightning.

Rachel was horrified even more by this and ran, neigh, sprinted. She moved faster than her legs had ever taken her. She sobbed uncontrollably, tears creating a furious current along the wind. The hot air nipped by her face in the late summer afternoon. She panted frantically.

Once again, in moments that she could not remember, Rachel was back in front of the strange tomb. Through mists and shrouded tree paths, Rachel found her way as if she had been to Belliano's tomb a thousand times before. The fear of being caught for what she had done was ever present in Rachel's mind. Her heart beat fast and sweat continued to pour from her body. Before she could count the steps she took, Rachel proceeded up walk way into the tomb. The entrance was still unlocked, just as Belliano had left it.

Somehow she expected to see Belliano standing there, smiling at her, but it was just as she had left it. A pool of fizzing ooze festered on the ground: Belliano's remains. Rachel scoffed at this sight. She walked slowly into the room, not knowing exactly what to expect. In this place of wires and odd trinkets, everything Belliano had said seemed possible. All his passionate rantings seemed real. All these things would help Rachel escape what she had done.

## **PART II**

### **QUEST OF THE SHADOW-GIRL**

#### **Chapter 5**

#### **Eden Incarnate**

Rachel stood upon the threshold of something crossed between science fiction and apocalyptic horror. If Belliano's out-of-this-world dimensional time machine truly was real, then Rachel had two choices: stay where she was, facing the certain unredeemable consequences of murder, or journey to a different world to satisfy a madman's quest. Of course, the logical mind would tell Rachel to run else where, to wander the face of the earth until all judgment was far away. However, Rachel had been mystically called to this place, to the graveyard of her parents. She felt an affinity to this temple-like tomb, where the terror of Belliano's death had played out. Driven by the distress of deaths all around her, Rachel welcomed the thought of another world. She hoped that there existed a paradisiacal place like Eden, where all her worries, and death itself, would not trouble her.

Her panicked mind raced with thoughts of flighty escape, and here before her lay the perfect solution. Rachel's mind had snapped like a woodland twig that a giant boot crushes. Her perceptions were changed, and her reality was altered. She was not of a rational mind.

The machine buzzed to her left. At this moment, Rachel was not overcome with horror or grief, but felt the adrenaline pumping her onward. She rushed out of the tomb into the afternoon mist of trees, shrouding this place with the likeness of an ancient Amazon shrine. The shadows of the trees cast their cavernous images all around, giving the sense that one was prancing through some temple carved out of the wood. But this was no shrine, temple, or mystical realm; it was just a misty grave yard, a dream land in the middle of reality.

Rachel had the sudden urge to dance between the trees' shadows. The sun was high in the sky, and beams of sunlight played throughout the graveyard fog. The mist was still thick and gray, perhaps even thicker than before. Rachel rushed forward, passing swiftly through the woods. Finally she came back to her parent's gravestones, the reason she was initially drawn to this strange place. Rachel stood firmly above the stones, staring at them, trying to find a direction. Had Rachel's mind actually snapped? Perhaps this was all some dream, something spawned from the darkness of a shadow.

Suddenly, the mists above the gravestones started to collect and take shape, clearing away at some places and building up at others until a ghostly outline of Rachel's mother appeared. The wisps of air continued to swirl about, gaining in brightness. It was her mother, in spirit-like form, suspended in the air, formed totally of mist. It looked like a mystical white fairy, or perhaps a spirit that haunted this woodland graveyard.

"Go, Rachel, go. Remember, you are special. You are a gift to this earth, unique, brave, and unstoppable," her mother's crisp melodic voice echoed. Rachel's face softened, and her heart warmed. She slowly turned and squinted in the mist to get a closer look at her mother. But the image was as brief as Rachel's glance, and the vision was gone.

Was her mind playing tricks on her? All this death surrounded her. Gravestones. Cameron's bloody form entered her mind, and Belliano's melted body tormented her. The pain of reality was ever present. Finally, Rachel sighed deeply and grimaced with fierce determination. Rachel produced the locket from her pocket and stared at its sheen metallic casing in her hand. She fiercely shoved it back into her pocket. She knew what she had to do. It was a matter of putting her mind to it.

Rachel ran back to the tomb, climbed the steps into the chamber, and stared at the machine. She breathed in deeply, trying to calm any pending anxieties. Her mother's voice reverberated in her head, and Domino Belliano's blue eyes seared into her soul. Cameron's death weighed on her conscience. Amidst the confusing tangle of emotions, Rachel had made her decision. She bit her lip, and looked around, making sure no one was there hiding in some dark corner to attack her. Paranoia was rampant.

She looked at the pool of gelatinous material on the ground where Domino Belliano had given his sermon only a short time ago. Rachel still thought Belliano's tale and these things were inconceivable, though her eyes did not lie. Visions of her mother and the blue eyes of her father were all the persuasion Rachel really needed. But now a murder hung over her head. It became clear that this meeting with Mr. Belliano, and perhaps, the death of her parents was no coincidence. Indeed, the fall of Cameron could have been some pre-fated plan. Was destiny, the omnipotent hand of God, pointing her down this path? Was this Rachel's calling? And was all this suffering really necessary?

Fearful reality came crashing in like broken glass dropped on a marble floor. Rachel was ushered over the edge. One person could only take so much, and she sunk to the depths of despair. She had to face

reality: she was a murderer. This was her escape. There was no chance at redemption for Rachel now. If this machine was just a fraud, then Rachel's life might as well be forfeit. She would sent to some juvenile school to spend her time. They would try to reform her, and no one would be able to see her side of the story. Rachel felt incredible shame for her actions. She wondered what Marty would think. What would her aunt do? What would her mother think if she was alive? Rachel sensed that her mother was watching her. The spirit she had seen above the graveyard was still fresh in her mind. This place, this graveyard, was enchanted. It seemed that all the creatures here were watching her, just like her mother. Her mother, the brilliant misty white light, rose above the fog like a sprite with wings, ready to tackle the demons who would thwart Rachel's path. But in the end, what would Mrs. Potastriali think of her murderous daughter? How could anyone not condemn what she had done?

But most of all, how could Rachel live with herself, knowing what she had done?

Rachel could not stand these maddening thoughts and refused to entertain them further. Rachel thrust her hand into her pocket and felt the locket there. She blinked resolutely. Her mind was still made up; she had to focus. She would operate this inferno machine and proceed on with this maddening quest, if it was all real. If, what if. Her life depended on a "what if". This was a gamble, a great risk. She took a deep breath and turned towards the control panel.

"What do I have to lose!" Rachel said sternly. A sense of deviancy tingled through her body for a moment, and an adventurous streak took over. She recalled riding 100 miles per hour in Marty's convertible; it was thrilling, downright thrilling. That's what this machine could be, if it really worked. In this misty mystical wood, the impossible could be possible. It could give her everything she sought.

Something hissed behind her. Rachel felt the air swirl in the room as if the mist from the woods had gotten inside and was alive. Her brow creased and a bead of sweat worked its way down her forehead. Moving close to the control panel, she looked at the blinking red button on it. From her other pocket, Rachel produced the control box Belliano had beckoned her use. She noticed the button on the control panel and the box were both very similar. In fact, they were complimentary to each other, blinking synchronously. After taking another deep breath, Rachel depressed the button on the control panel. She noticed the light on her control box stopped blinking and totally went out.

Rachel stepped up slightly onto the human-sized chamber area. It was like a glass phone booth with only two walls. Essentially, it was an archway. Rachel stood firmly underneath the archway, and looked up, waiting for something to happen.

The sound of a motor grew louder. A white light crawled up the side of the chamber with brilliant fluorescence. The hissing outside the chamber increased, and a red swirling form began to materialize in front of the chamber. Was this supposed to happen? No, this was red mass was something different, something coming to get her. Rachel shrunk back a bit as a hideous face appeared in the red swirling mass. She hoped this machine did what it was supposed to. A computerized voice was heard.

“32 gigawatts. Maximum power dissipation reached,” it said. Suddenly, bolts of blue electricity arced out of the chamber’s two semi-circular walls.

“Static field created. Warning: Please restrict all movements within high level EMF chamber. Thank you,” the computer said. The arcs of white electricity became blue and whirled around Rachel’s body. Suddenly, she found herself spinning. She spun around the room, just like a merry-go-round. The wild ride whirled Rachel around so fast that the room disappeared in a flurry of colors and then finally blackness. Oddly, she did not feel dizzy, only disoriented.

At that moment, electrical currents entered her body. Jolting only slightly, Rachel was unharmed as the arcs penetrated her skin. Rachel was suddenly aware of how fast she was spinning. A scream tried to work its way out of Rachel’s lungs, but there was a flash of bright blinding white light. Her body became numb, and Rachel slipped into unconsciousness. She tried to fight the impending blackness as her eyes rolled. She fell into deep sleep and heard the faint voice of her mother. “Save us, save us all!” Finally, the blackness consumed her mind and she passed into temporary oblivion.

\* \* \*

The blackness slowly faded away as Rachel returned to consciousness. She slowly moved her body and shifted on the hard ground beneath her. Rachel’s eyes opened and blurred as the misty moon-filled sky came into view. Instinctively, she tried to sit up, but every muscle in her body ached and held her to the ground. No matter what the brain told the body to do, her muscles refused to respond. She expanded the fingers on her hand and felt the damp soil underneath blades of cool grass.

Suddenly her arm twitched, an aftermath of the electrical current passing through her body. In this stunned state, she thought of Belliano's quest. Her mind wandered to what he had said. She recalled his words: "What if we could save humanity before it walked down the path of destruction and blood shed? What if we could be one step ahead of the devil himself?" Although these thoughts were still somewhat ludicrous, Rachel's mind sorely wanted to escape her own reality. She forgot about things like Cameron, Marty, and her aunt. Rachel strained to move sore muscles. Her mind wandered and dreamt: could it all be true? Was she in a different place, a different time?

Slowly, Rachel regained control of her body and moved its aching limbs. She sat up. Her head hung heavy as an anchor on her shoulders. She looked around in the moon-lit night and immediately noticed that there were no sounds. There was not an inkling of any living creature, no resemblance of a breeze, or even a cloud in the sky. It seemed she was possessed in the stillness of the moment permanently. She stared up at the black sky, away from the moon low on the horizon, and witnessed stars brighter than she had ever seen. Rachel nearly had to shield her eyes, as the stars were like bright forceful entities that watched over the earth. The moon shone like a proud king with an army of stars. Trees in the clearing surrounded her; it was a great orchard with every type of foliage spread before her.

Rachel smiled, and all the troubles of her life melted away with the twinkles of the luminous stars in the sky. Feeling crept back into Rachel's limbs now, and the shadow-girl pressed to her feet. Bushes formed a wall-like structure behind her. She had seen this somewhere before, and a startling sensation of *deja-vu* passed over Rachel. After a few moments, the realization dawned on her.

The bushes were a gate. They were the exact same heavenly gate she had day-dreamed about in the clouds. How wonderfully strange! A gate made of bushes. A passing dream of the day became reality. She sighed deeply. The air condensed and cooled her breath. She moved around on the grass for the first time. The orchard smelled fresh and new as if it had just been planted. Everything felt so serene, so ordered. She walked up to one of the trees and touched one of the leaves. Luscious fruit dangled from the tree branches, glimmering like glass Christmas balls in the moonlight.

Every waking breath Rachel took convinced her that she had succeeded; she has passed into another realm. She was in no longer in a grave yard, and the dark misty woods of the tomb were no where to be found. Only a sumptuous natural orchard sparkled in the eerie light of the night.

This place could not be of this earth. If it was on the earth, it was surely some other realm, some place that men had only dreamt about. This was some different land, another dimension just like Belliano said, perhaps even some strange place in the past; it truly was “another world, another time, another place”. This place possessed a dream-like quality; it was just as unusual as Belliano had implied.

Rachel continued to walk around, and became utterly entangled in the fantastical orchard. The grass was like silken carpet, the breeze like angel’s breath, and the trees like unique street lights reflecting the light of the moon and its children, the stars. Surely, this was some place that had been created by a higher being, if any existed. A place fixed in tranquility before man knew the likeness of time.

Out of the corner of her left eye, Rachel thought she saw two figures in a clearing. Rachel stopped moving, and scrutinized the clearing where she glimpsed the two figures. Her eyes nearly jumped from her skull as she did indeed saw two figures, two naked figures. They were sleeping next to a giant oak tree. An instinctual fear crept over her, and she hid behind one of the trees. She shook her head in wonder, and looked around at the garden again. Was she really in Eden? Or was this madness? Was this a figment of the clouds and shadows or a puff smoke gone wrong?

Rachel wanted to pinch herself, but that was just silly. Was this a dream that the shadow-girl would suddenly awake from in a cold sweat? She looked out from behind the tree again. The figures looked brilliant and real to her, even though they were at the other side of the clearing. Could they see her?

Another thought occurred to Rachel: if this was Eden, then those two people must be Adam and Eve. Could it be? Was Belliano right? Adam and Eve were said to be naked before they ate from the tree of knowledge. And these two figures were indeed very naked. Rachel blinked hard and studied the two people curled up on the bed of grass near the oak tree. This was like an image from an art gallery, some Hieronymus Bosch painting or one of her grandfather’s heirlooms in the back room of the house.

She touched the tree besides her and noticed how smooth the bark felt; the texture soft on her hand like touching wool. In fact, everything in this place was smooth and retained a silken quality. The air was entirely fresh and permeated with a fruity smell. Every breath was like wafting scents from a bouquet of flowers. Rachel’s senses seemed inadequate to fully absorb the stimuli present, as if this place was not made for human beings to observe. Everything she touched, heard, and saw represented perfection; it was like walking around in some kingly palace, yet it was completely made from nature. There were no marble

steps or golden walls or dazzling jewels, only grass and trees, but it was more beautiful than anything Rachel had ever conceived of. It could be nothing less than paradise.

Rachel quietly removed herself from the scene of the sleeping nude people, letting them rest in their undisturbed slumber. It was so quiet that Rachel thought her very steps across the soft blades of grass might wake the unsuspecting sleepers. She continued to explore the garden further. Rachel inadvertently picked up her pace, nearly jogging. Soon her steps became a fairy's dance amongst the endless trees and random clearings. From her comfortable house to a strange cavernous mist to a nightly paradise, Rachel had traveled through many worlds in one day.

As she continued moving, Rachel heard a very faint distant noise ahead of her. It was a gushing noise that resonated through the orchard; why hadn't she heard it before? Rachel found herself running through crisp night towards the noise. She saw a clearing far away at the bottom of a valley. She realized she was on a great hill surrounding an even greater valley. At the bottom of the valley was a massive river. To Rachel's left, a great gulf could be seen; this was source of the river. She stood at the edge of the orchard, however more trees spread perpetually towards the horizon on the opposite bank of the river. The river continued on for miles, but in the distant horizon, Rachel could see that the river split into several tributaries. The garden itself was vast, and the river acted as a border to different land segments.

Rachel suddenly realized how high up she was. She was looking down from far far above the river, as if on a mountain. She could see the lush rivers and valleys twisting throughout the horizon. The moon and the stars brought down a crisp, clear light. There was no need for electricity or even candles. The illumination of the white moon was incredible. Standing there, at the edge of the orchard, Rachel fully realized how beautiful the sky was. The trees has blocked some of the light before, but now, she could see the brilliance of the night sky's illumination reflecting off the waters and the trees. Rachel sighed peacefully, completely consumed, wondering if she would be able to stay here forever.

Suddenly the hair stood up on the back of Rachel's head. Someone was there with her, right behind her. The breeze picked up lightly in the garden, and the moon light dimmed as a cloud passed over it. She could even hear slithering movements through the grass in this place of amplified senses, this place of eternal quiet. She spun around quickly, and came face to face with something completely inhuman.



A human-sized creature stood there, but it was cloaked in scales like a serpent. Its scales were shiny and reflected the moonlight. The creature's head was that of a snake's head. The serpent possessed several limb-like structures, two scaly arms and two legs. It appeared humanoid and moved slowly towards Rachel. Wings also sprouted from the creature's back and folded neatly as if ready to spread for flight. It was about Rachel's height. Its eyes were red and contained no pupil. A forked tongue periodically shot out from its mouth; it was much larger than any snake's tongue she had ever seen. As the winged snake-like humanoid shifted, tiny beams of light shot out into the darkness from in between the scales. It was as if the scales were concealing a great light that burnt hot in the guts of the creature. The scales were armor for the inner light.

The snake was much larger and more hideous than any creature Rachel had ever seen. This was no rattlesnake from the desert! Indeed, it was much more magnificent and horrifying. Rachel's mouth dropped and a deductive thought struck her: was this the creature from Marty's dream? Hadn't he seen a giant snake with Cameron? She had no more time to ponder this as the creature was upon her.

Fear tightened around Rachel's chest as if an anaconda was squeezing the life away. Like someone who was afraid to move because of huge claws that would cut them, Rachel was frozen in place. Her words echoed through the air, through the valley, and sounded weak and feeble as they were doused completely in fright.

"What is this? Who are you?" she asked, her entire body shaking. Would the snake even understand her? Her own voice was frightening her; would it make any difference, any words she would say to this creature? The creature pressed closer to her, and its expression suddenly took on a human quality. She felt a heaviness take control of her feet, and she was paralyzed, mesmerized by the creature before her. For quite some time, the serpent inspected her body, and maintained an analytical expression. Why couldn't she move? It was as if her feet had grown roots and planted themselves to the ground. 'Run, Rachel, run' she thought, but her brain was disconnected from her senses. The creature stood very close to her; if it was any closer, the serpent would have touched her with its face.

A peculiar hissing sound came from behind her. Rachel turned to find the source of the sound and realized that the creature was beginning to speak. The strange ventriloquist-like hissing noise moved around her head like a very slow whispering wind; it rushed around her and then centered on the mouth of

the serpent. The hissing noise resembled tones of several languages. Slowly, English words dripped out of the serpent's mouth.

"Creature of the night, thy body allures me. Thy curious garments," it said, hissing the words. "Do not fear me for thou art possessed of a goddess' form." Rachel blushed. Was that some kind of old fashioned compliment? She was still unable to move; however, the creature's hiss took on a seductive passion. Oddly, she felt compelled to touch the humanoid serpent. An adventurous quality within her soul gave her the strength, and the blatant resilience, to reach out and touch the serpent's shoulder.

It was soft! Much softer than the ground that Rachel woke upon earlier.

The serpent's eyes glittered with obvious delight. She could sense that her touch somehow aroused the serpent. Was it arousal or intrigue that the creature beheld? She could not tell for sure. The creature reached out to her shoulder and touched it. Its tongue slithered out of the mouth and slowly across her cheek. Rachel closed her eyes and moaned. What power this creature had! She felt tingles electrify her spine and penetrate through the neck to her chest and legs. The serpent's tongue slithered along her neck, and she panted lightly. The tension and fear of the moment overwhelmed her, however the fear was minimized by the mystical presence of the serpent's tongue on her neck. The anxiety was expelled through a wave of tingles. Rachel was confused. Her visual senses were repelled by the creature, but her sense of touch was compelled and drawn to it!

An overwhelming sensation of embarrassment ripped through her body. She blushed even more. She gasped and released a great sigh. Her mind was playing tricks on her again. She was oddly attracted to this loathsome being. There was a certain elegance and beauty in the way the serpent moved. Logic screamed to Rachel in the back of her mind: Beware, this could be the devil himself! Was the Father of Lies seducing her? Such a sensual being, full of delight and darkness, could not be a devil. She remembered Domino Belliano's timely warnings about the devil. She remembered everything she had ever read or seen regarding the devil, the chief of Hell. The seduction, anxiety, and fear all faded away and were replaced with a sense of duty.

Rachel thought of Marty's dream again. Marty described a "giant snake" that had been with Cameron. Could the creature be the devil and have somehow influenced Cameron over the years, seducing him to his evil ways? Could this really be the same creature? That was just a dream, and this was real and

tangible. Rachel had just touched its scales; it was physical and completely real. But this was a place where dreams dared to meet reality. If Cameron really did have associations with this creature, then that might explain his murderous intent and jealous rage.

This had to be Satan! What other explanation was there? Instinct knew it was true. But this tongue caressing Rachel's neck, more tender than hands, lulled her into a heated fury of erotica. The darkness of the being drew her further into the serpent's snare. How could such a sensual and alluring thing be capable of any evil?

Rachel noticed that as her erotic sensations increased, the snake's tongue slowed. The sensation of the tongue on her neck became more of a quick tickle. However, the serpent was not slowing down on its own accord. Somehow, her erotica pushed the snake into a moment of stillness. Yet again, this eerie power surfaced in a random moment of intense emotion. The moment of slowness faded, and the serpent resumed its steady-paced tongue pleasure.

Rachel tried to think logically, to resist, but the tongue was so full of pleasantries. She had to focus her thoughts on other ideas like duty and purpose. She thought of her duty and Belliano's plight, what he died for, always keeping that in the back of her mind. She knew what she had to do, despite the pleasure she was feeling. She just had to focus, to resist.

She would have to play along with the creature and keep it occupied. Rachel could tease it, taunt it, and play this sensual game that the creature had already begun. She had to distract the snake so she could figure out what to do next. Indeed, if this creature was really the devil, could she even tease it? Was that a possibility? She had to seduce this creature, and trick it. No matter how utterly confounded a thought it was, Rachel had to try.

She held the serpent's shoulder, and slowly rubbed it. The devil responded by slithering its shoulder lightly underneath her hand. She was doing it; she was playing the devil's game! She smiled all of a sudden. The thought amused her, the fact that she could even deceive the master of deceit. Perhaps it was treacherously wrong to play with this creature, but what an intense thrill it gave her.

In fact, it felt wonderful to lie, to deceive. Rachel felt like she was one-upping the devil; it gave her a feeling of superiority. She grinned widely now, watching the snake succumb to her touch. 'This feels

so good. I love this. I love the fact that he doesn't know how in control I am, that he doesn't know that I'm tempting him. Isn't he supposed to be tempting me?!'

Wait, was it her voice that echoed inside her head? Or was it the devil that was trying to put these thoughts in her head? Rachel stopped smiling, and panted fearfully. She could feel the evil building in her; a force of pure evil flowed from this creature, almost more intense than the brightness of the crisp moon in the sky. She stroked the side of the serpent's head and felt the sensation of lust grow within her. She swayed towards the devil in a drugged motion. Rachel shook her head, trying to shake off the sensation, but the lust was consuming her like a potent infectious venom.

She had to escape. This serpent, the Father Of Lies, was draping her in lust. But how could she do get away? Rachel had dug herself into a deceitful hole by playing this 'game', and it seemed impossible to retreat. Suddenly, she realized that the creature was moving away from her. The serpent edged its way into the darkness, walking away slowly on its scaled legs. And then, with the blink of an eye, the snake was gone. Rachel squinted, and looked for any sign of the evil presence that surrounded her mere moments ago. There was no wind and no hissing sound. The exquisite touch and tingling sensations were gone just as quickly as the vanishing serpent.

Rachel wondered if what she had just experienced really happened. Did her own memories lie to her? One moment, everything was sensual and tangible, and the next moment, they faded in oblivion with the likeness of a dream. The deceit of this creature ran further than just plain lies; its very existence was shrouded in utter confusion and twisted truth.

Then she heard the hissing noise again. A great gush of wind brushed past her shoulder as a reminder, almost whispering, "Yes, my darling, it was real". Rachel twisted around in all directions, but she did not see the serpent. The devil had vanished and was a faint image in Rachel's memory now. How unreal and full of fantasy it all seemed. The evil and lust that had filled her moments ago were whisked away with that last brush of wind.

The air was quiet, and the brilliant moon shone again. The garden was as lush and beautifully serene as it had been. Rachel questioned if anything she had seen was real, just as surely as the moon wondered if the sun had ever risen in the sky before it. Rachel was aware of the great disturbance that the giant walking snake had caused. The entire garden brightened again since the creature had departed. She

was so caught up in the lust and fear that she had not noticed how the surroundings darkened. Nature itself feared the presence of the serpent.

Fear still gripped Rachel; what was she going to do now? She looked around at the garden and realized that the lower sky had brightened to a purplish hue. The sun would be rising soon. Rachel shook her head and closed her eyes. "It's just a bad dream," she told herself, but her eyes opened and the ghostly pre-dawn remained. The orchard had not changed.

Eden. The Garden of Eden. Only such a place with ripe air and luscious surroundings such as this could be the king of all paradises. More alluring than any tropical island, this place presided over all paradises with its lush sensual delights.

Surely, that creature was the devil; Rachel knew it, she felt that, every fiber of her being told her. Rachel remembered the two naked human beings, who could instantly become victims to the evil snake, the devil, Lucifer, the angel of light, the father of lies, king of serpents. Adam and Eve! Truly, these humans must be Adam and Eve. The mythical progenitors of the human race slept right around the corner, yet the devil prowled this garden. They were in danger!

Rachel retraced her steps. She moved with strength and an unquenchable sense of duty. Rachel's emotional strength took over and allowed her to move with inhuman dexterity. Nothing moved around her, and Rachel was like the wind itself.

For the first time, Rachel's own movements made her realize the power she had. Was it just this place or were these powers hers to possess for all time? She could feel the stillness of time as she moved. Rachel could possess herself of the moment; she could control time. The natural serenity and complete peacefulness of this place appeared to amplify this power of hers. Again, Rachel questioned her sanity. What was she, some sort of superhero with special powers?

Perhaps that was why she was chosen by Domino Belliano to travel here. She could fight Satan was this power. If she could slow the actions of the devil, then perhaps she could outwit him. Indeed, she felt the power working even when she was with the serpent. She could feel time moving into stillness.

Thinking back, Rachel recalled childhood memories of her mother. One time, her mother was slicing tomatoes and almost cut her finger, but Rachel had seen the knife moving towards her mother's finger. Out of fear, Rachel must have slowed time down. Her mother gaped at her finger and avoided

cutting herself. Dozens of little incidents like this passed through Rachel's mind. Her mother must have picked up on the fact that Rachel had this ability, for she would often say things like, "Time is something you will hold forever" and "Fate is in your hands". She did not condemn Rachel's power but encouraged it without even understanding it. She did as any good mother would have done, even though she knew that the power could be perverted to do deadly evils. Perhaps these powers explained why she could see her mother's spiritual form. Who really knew.

The reasons behind these powers were still a mystery, but Rachel did not care about that right now. All she knew was that she might have the ability to outwit the devil. That was the only conclusion Rachel could come to, that her powers were given to her to thwart the devil's plan. Uncertainty washed over Rachel, and doubt consumed her mind; could she pull this off? She remembered the blue fire in Domino Belliano's eyes, those eyes just like her father's. Her father's steadfast courage and confidence were always an inspiration to Rachel. Those eyes were burnt into her memory.

Rachel reached into her pocket and held the locket once again. She smiled, thinking of all the encouragement her parents had given her. She wished they were there to help her, to guide her, to give her confidence. Her father was always so confident. He had always known what to do.

She needed that same confidence in herself. Her father was not there to give it to her; her mother's answers to everything were not there; Domino Belliano was not there to guide her. And Rachel continually tortured herself with the knowledge that she has murdered one of her friends. She was only here to escape the real world. There was no duty or sense of purpose except for the fact that she was a failure in another world. In conclusion, Rachel knew that she could not be a failure in this world. She refused to let Domino Belliano down. She had to draw on strength from within herself. She had to summon powers that she never knew even existed. Perhaps the power of self-confidence was more important than any other supernatural powers she might possess.

Rachel stiffened her entire being as she swiftly slid between the trees of this serene paradise. She could do this! She could do what Belliano had planned for her! Rachel just had to think, to reason out what she would do. She had to find the Tree of Knowledge that Adam and Eve ate from, that cast mankind out of paradise. Wasn't that her quest? Wasn't that what she came here for?

But the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge was nowhere to be found. Rachel thought hard, and finally it dawned on her that Eve would know where the tree was. After all, if this was really a biblical story playing out, wouldn't that mean God had shown Eve where the tree is, so he could forbid her to eat from it? Yes, that was it. Eve could lead her to the tree. Rachel thought no more about the words of her mother and the eyes of her father. She stopped focusing on the apocryphal warnings of her short-lived mentor, Domino Belliano. She pushed ideas of death and failure back into the far reaches of her mind, and tried to be brave. She had only herself to depend on here, and she could not allow the thoughts of others influence her purpose.

Rachel felt proud and filled with duty. The new-found strength and self-confidence were foreign to her, but she loved thinking, or at least pretending, that she was some sort of epic hero. A spiritual crusader sent on some impossible mission across time and space. However, Rachel was still human, and as humans do, felt an extreme lethargy set in. She still had to sleep. But, first, she would find Eve.

Rachel was still a child. But she had always been the rebel at heart; she had always been someone who would stand up against adversaries based on her beliefs. She always had a strong conscience and knew the right thing to do. Based on all the fantastic things she had seen, Rachel believed that it was indeed her duty to see through what Belliano had sent her to do.

Rachel had run to the other side of the garden and realized she was sweating. How long had she been moving? She was so caught up in thought that she lost track of her surroundings. Focus, she needed to focus.

Finally, she stopped moving, and noticed that dawn was upon her. The sky was turning purple and red. The sun peaked up its head slowly in the valley. Rachel arrived at the clearing where the two people slept. She examined them closely. In all essence, they were physically flawless. Their features contained no fat or any contamination that was present from fast food restaurants and potato chips of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. No, their bodies were muscular and attractive, perfect inceptive specimens of humanity, uncorrupted and untainted by evil. They slept very straight on the ground; their bodies were sprawled out comfortably, and their arms lay at their sides like mannequins. Only their heads rested on the edge of roots from a great oak tree. Rachel crept quietly closer to them. Not an ounce of dirt ran over their skin. They were like newly sheathed swords that had been pulled from fires of the metal and laid here to rest.

They had to be Adam and Eve!

Rachel closed her eyes and thought about time and the moment. She had to put these powers to the test, to see if she could actually control them. She wanted to *will* the stillness of time to come over her. She opened her eyes, but could not tell if anything was different. The serenity of the garden was so great already that perhaps her powers had no effect. Then she moved her hands, and she noticed that they moved in a great wave of delayed motion. Rachel's mouth dropped. She pranced over to Adam and Eve, and moved with the same waving motions. She stood in front of them and gazed at their peaceful naked chests, rising and heaving in such serenity, unstained by sin.

Rachel focused harder on possessing herself of the slowness. She closed her eyes again. This time when she opened them, she was able to move her arms freely around her. She moved close to Adam and looked into his eyes, but he did not notice. She danced around, and then noticed an object floating about 30 feet away from her. One ray of sun had caught this object and illuminated it. The sun had risen low on the horizon of the valley and was barely penetrating the trees of the garden.

Rachel rushed over to the object and clearly saw that it was a leaf. It was a leaf that was falling to the ground, but had been suspended in the air as if the sunbeam had reached out and snagged it. Rachel smiled and giggled. She had done this, had she not? Could she touch it? Her hand snatched the leaf from the air and tore it in half. The leaf fell in two shattered pieces to the ground. She stared at them hard, and they stopped their descent! Rachel felt sick to her stomach. This power made her nauseas.

The broken pieces of the leaf stood motionless in time, and fully displayed the deadliness of her power. She could destroy anything without time playing a part. She looked back at Adam and Eve, and realized how beautiful they appeared when possessed in her stillness. Not only were they beautiful, but a certain degree of innocence pervaded every part of their being. Rachel hoped they would always remain as innocent and blissful as they appeared during sleep. Rachel turned to look at the broken leaf and noticed that it was once again falling to the ground. Her powers had been upset and distracted.

The nauseas feeling came again; it became so intense that she collapsed to the ground along with the broken leaf. Rachel crawled over to another giant tree at the other side of the clearing. She squirmed and rolled off to the side behind the tree. She did want Adam and Eve to wake up. She did not want them to know she existed. For the moment, she must remain hidden.



Rachel gripped her stomach in terrible agony. She could not let Eve witness the great pain she felt. Apparently, these powers of hers came with a price. She felt complete exhaustion, and her eyes slowly twitched to a close. Her head rested against the oak tree like the two figures in the distance. She blinked and tried to resist the fatigue that was consuming the body. But eventually the drowsiness won, and Rachel passed into restful oblivion. The shadow-girl slept.

## Chapter 6

### Stopping the First Sin

A quick inhalation of breath broke Rachel out of sleep. In a blurry haze, her eyes shuttered open and squinted in the sunlight pushing its way between the tree branches hanging above her. For a moment, Rachel sat there in mild delirium and then remembered where she was. She quickly bolted into an upright position and recalled that two figures who were sleeping close by. Rachel remained hidden behind the tree and slowly peered around it towards the resting spot of Adam and Eve.

They were not there. Where could they have gone? How long had Rachel dosed? She twisted about, and peered around the garden between the trees. Still, they were nowhere to be found. A wavering panic seized Rachel. Her feet instinctively moved into the lush thickness of the garden, and rustled through thousands of recently fallen leaves. She heard more rustling behind her. Quickly she turned but saw nothing. Was she just imagining the sound? She stood still for a moment and watched the leaves on the ground. There was no wind, not the slightest breeze. But something must have moved.

Then she heard it again, and this time she saw it. Rachel looked off into the distance in front of her and saw a creature running very quickly between the scattered trees. It was approaching, hiding behind trees as it closed in. It moved so fast! It was barely even detectable. If there had not been such tender calmness in the garden, Rachel would not have seen it. From a distance, Rachel thought it was the serpentine devil again. Soon enough, the creature moved out from behind the trees and stood there plainly in the clearing before Rachel. Its eyes glowed a brilliant white as they glared at her.

It was a beast about 6 feet tall and was obviously built for battle. Fur covered the beast's entire body like a thick armor, and the hair on its head was long like a helmet. A white light shown in the creature's eyes as if they were just holes in the creature's head to let illumination penetrate from deep within. Puffy cheeks rumped on the creature's face, and a permanent calming smile swept across its countenance. A large pair of delicate wings sprouted from the backside of the creature. It appeared similar to the serpent, but with fur instead of scales; this creature was more of a beast. Rachel's intuition told her to run, but then she resisted her earlier fears. She creased her brow with fierce demeanor.

"Who goes there!" she exclaimed with the ferocity of an animal whose territory had been disrupted. The creature tilted its head as if it did not understand the question.

"I asked you a question!" Rachel demanded, her heart racing. The creature looked up for a moment and then glared at Rachel again with the most innocent of faces.

"Sent from Our Father above, I am a Cherubim, and an angel dedicated to the highest protection. The wisdom of the Lord has been passed unto me so that it may be delivered unto you," the creature spoke in a soft voice. Rachel was shocked by the tones of the creature's feathery voice, and her fierceness dissipated completely. The creature tilted its head opposite the direction from before.

"Appointed here by the Lord, Our Creator, I am a guardian of the Tree of Eternal Life that grows here in Eden. It is my duty in the Name of God to ascertain your purpose here," the creature said. Yet again, it struck Rachel odd that a strange being with animal characteristics knew her language. Perhaps this creature learned the same way the devil learned, through some sort of divine osmosis. All these creatures had to be angels of some sort. Even the devil was angel.

"I am Rachel Potastriali," Rachel said, her voice projecting much louder and harsher than she expected. "I am here... I'm here to prevent a grave mishap from occurring. I have come across of time and space to visit." Shocked but confident in her tones, Rachel continued. Like some great medieval sorceress, she waved her hand in the air. "Eden is threatened by the devil, a serpent of the greatest deceitful power. I'm here to stop him."

The Cherubim continued to glare, but the expression of bliss never left its face. Its hands rose into the air, turned inward, and clasped together as if it were holding something. In a few a moments, between the Cherubim's outstretched hands, an orange discoloration the size of a pinpoint materialized. It started spinning and continued to grow in size. Soon, the orange discoloration burst into red and yellow with a bright flash. Rachel felt heat come from this red and yellow burst, and she shielded her eyes.

When she looked at the Cherubim again, a fiery revolving sword rested in both of its hands. Specifically, the creature clung to a bright metallic handle from which the spinning hazy orange flame twisted several feet into the air. The creature's stance altered as its legs spread apart as if to brace for some sort of impact. For sure, this Cherubim was built for battle.

"You speak of a threat. What *threat*?" the Cherubim said, its voice now echoing with a vicious edge to it, even though the face remained unchanged. Rachel gulped but summoned all her courage.

“It is the devil, so I think, in the form of a walking serpent. He’s come to deceive the two human beings that live here in Eden. He’s a demon of lust, I think. An evil angel,” Rachel said, trying to remember what Belliano had told her, and trying combine it with what she had witnessed already. Fallen angels and castaways? Were those even Christian teachings or were they teachings of the witches and other folklore? An overwhelming sadness draped over the Cherubim’s face.

“An evil angel. The Almighty Lord cast out an angel, an angel that desired the Lord’s power, an angel that desired to rule the earth. The damnable angel was full of deceit and warred with the hosts of Heaven, taking one third of the Stars with him. He was called Satan after his fall,” the Cherubim said.

“Yes, Satan, the devil, whatever you call it, he will tempt those who your heavenly father created. He will tempt them to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,” Rachel explained, remembering Belliano’s rhetoric. “I know this, well, because I was sent here to stop this from happening. It must be stopped, at all costs.”

Determination wrapped Rachel’s face like a confident blanket.

“Rachel Potastriali, the traveler of space and time, bringer of this information of an evil deed, it is my duty to protect this garden. It is my duty to secure this place, a sphere of heaven in a mortal realm, from all evil. Although, it would normally be my duty to expel anyone who violates this garden, but I must refrain now. It is not my place to protect the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Only the Tree of Eternal Life is sacred to me. No one must learn of its secrets. Immortality is not a gift that can be sought at the behest of human will; it is granted by the Creator. And so this is the word of the Lord,” the Cherubim said.

“You know, you could come help, but you’re refusing to do that, aren’t you?” Rachel said. The Cherubim’s features remained unaltered as did its poised flaming sword. Rachel continued.

“You’re refusing, even though I’m telling you that the two humans will be sent away. Adam and Eve will be cast out forever, and the bush gates to Eden that I saw over that hill in the distance will be locked forever to us, to all humans! The destiny of an entire race should not rest on the sins of two beings. You must help me!” Rachel said, feeling the redness flush to her face.

The flaming sword roared with the tenacity of the sun, sizzling and cracking in its orange and red hues. The Cherubim’s white glowing eyes were not phased, however an expression of puzzlement spread across the beast’s entire face.

“It would be a dishonor to the divine duties to which I am assigned. I do the direct bidding of the Father, Our Lord, and his bidding is to protect this garden and its center, the Tree of Life. The divine wisdom does not tell me to protect The Tree of Knowledge of Life and Death, therefore it is no concern of mine. I do not have the power or pride to pass judgment. Only the Father, Our Lord, may do so. I am His humble servant,” the Cherubim said. Confidence rounded the shape of its innocent face. Its eyes dimmed for a moment and a black iris could be seen. Was there sadness in those eyes? It spoke again.

“Rachel,” it said compassionately, its voice suddenly very human and contemporary. “I cannot help you. If what you say is true, then the banishment of these two human beings is divine destiny. It is their will, the will power of the two human beings, that guides them towards their own worldly consequences. After all, the Lord has made it known that they should not eat from the Tree of Knowledge. The Lord has warned them, and I cannot interfere with the decisions of Adam or Eve, whether they are right or not. I do not possess the same free will that they have. I am powerless to intervene for I am an angel, a Star underneath the brilliant light of the divine throne. I am bound by the creed set down for all angels to serve the Lord. In all his glory and mercy, He has given humanity the ability to define their own destiny, whether it is good or bad. That is their gift, or their curse, whichever way you look at it. If Adam and Eve take a path contrary to the word of the God, then they deserve a righteous sentence.”

“But Adam and Eve don’t deserve a ‘righteous’ fate. They were cast out because of the devil’s temptation. They were fooled!” Rachel pleaded.

“Fooled, you say, as if it has already happened and no choice is yet to be made. Perhaps Adam and Eve were enlightened by the wisdom of this rebellious angel. The devil, Satan, desires knowledge. His failing was pride; he desired power for himself, the power of the heavenly father. Hence he was banished from the exalted kingdom. If this creature wishes to deceive the human beings created by our Father, then so be it. The humans were *granted* the will to choose their own destinies; that’s the power God has given them, free will. They choose their own battles and make decisions for themselves. With that freedom, any conceivable feat is possible. They can resist Satan, the king of lies, if they wish,” the Cherubim explained. Rachel scoffed at the creature, despite its harsh flaming sword.

“Then Belliano was right. Angels really don’t have any will of their own, and just like he said, they can’t or won’t interfere with the actions of human beings, even if it means helping us and doing the

right thing. In that case, I don't know why you're talking to me. I thought you were here to throw me out of the garden, and since you haven't done that, I thank you. I've made up my mind. I have to do this thing; I have to follow through, even though you won't help me. So, I guess I'm using my free will," Rachel said, standing her ground.

The Cherubim nodded complacently without any argument. As quickly as it came, the beast darted off into the forest from whence it came. 'Hmphh, some help he was', Rachel thought with a quick sigh. She shrugged, and proceeded forward. With mortal and angel parted, Rachel's search for the progenitors of human race began.

\* \* \*

After searching the garden for hours on end, Rachel finally found Adam and Eve. As she walked along, Rachel heard laughing echo through the silent garden. She quickly hid behind some underbrush. Out of the garden from behind a few bushes, she spied two figures emerge with frivolous steps. They skipped along merrily, completely naked, arm in arm. Rachel smiled at the corny appearance of the two progenitors. They were as innocent as children. She heard them speak; again, oddly enough, she could understand them! Did everyone in this garden speak English?

"Eve, my beauty, I hath become fatigued. I will go rest over there. Seek me when thy need of me," he said smiling. Eve kissed him gently, and Adam scurried off into the distance. Eve's homely and natural demeanor radiated from her being. She walked around and started humming a tune. The subtle music coming from her body vibrated with great resonance, and filled Rachel with relaxation. The tones ushering from Eve's lips were like a harp that had been played for the first time. The sounds were original and creative, as the world was fresh and had not heard such things before.

Eve was not paying attention to where she was going. Soon she was directly in front of a tree that contained the most splendid fruit in the entire garden. An eerie mist surrounded the entire tree. Eve stopped suddenly and looked at the tree with puzzlement. Rachel licked her lips and leaned forward. This had to be it: the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil! Only a tree like this with such perfect shining grape-like fruits would qualify. Suddenly, there was a rush of wind that broke Eve out of puzzlement and sent her into a dazzled fright.

The breeze ceased. Lo and behold, the walking serpent emerged from behind the tree. There he was, Satan, the damned devil himself. Rachel looked closely and noticed the devil was more serpent-like than before; it was much less humanoid and coiled more like a snake. Indeed, this creature had the ability to change its shape at will. Truly, it was Satan, the master of deceit.

Was this the moment of sin when Eve would be tempted and the future of mankind would be irrevocably altered? Eve pealed back in fear initially, but then slowed her escape as she was paralyzed by the obsidian eyes of the devil. Rachel peered back and forth between the devil and Eve. Eve had been mesmerized and lulled into a trance, just like Rachel had been earlier.

Almost as if a fly was in her hair, Eve shook her head quickly and broke the trance of the devil. She cowering towards the trunk of the tree and appeared to be aware of the snake's evil presence. She moved through the mists surrounding the tree, and leaned against its thick bark. The serpent slithered closer to Eve. Its expression took on a similar demeanor to that of the Cherubim. It possessed those angelic cheeks and innocent eyes of light that could bring calmness unto anyone. The serpent's hissing speech spit forth.

"Hark there, has God said to you, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'" Rachel heard. This was it! Rachel's heart pounded; she was witnessing the devil tempt Eve. The serpent was doing it. Eve's expression was one of wonder, and she looked up at the serpent with a certain reverence as her hand braced her body on the tree. It was as if Eve saw through the serpent's disguise and knew this creature was made of angelic matter.

Eve said, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" The serpent laughed in hissing mockery at Eve's statement. Eve's face displayed straight-forwardness and sincerity; she believed deeply in the words she had spoken. Eve was shocked by the hissing chuckles of the serpent.

"You shall not surely die," Satan said, laughing loudly. "For God does not know that in the day you eat from the tree that your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." The serpent's eyes glowed, and its voice presented a convincing echo that passed through the entire garden. Rachel was paralyzed by the trance that the serpent projected. Perhaps she was in awe of the ghastly historical and rudimentary events she was witnessing. She tried to move but could not will herself

away from her spot behind the bushes. Eve was considering Satan's words. Rachel had to do something! Why did she feel so useless—

Or was it that Rachel *could not* move? Rachel realized that something was holding her in place! She forced her arms to move upwards, but found great resistance. It was not a psychological restraint; something was physically keeping her there. She fitfully flailed her arms up and down, hitting something hard. A muffled grunt came from a physical presence. Rachel twisted her head to see a small flying creature with horns lying on the ground. The creature was some sort of winged demon that had come to stop Rachel. It was disoriented from Rachel's blow. It recovered quickly, however, and flew up into the air flapping its hummingbird-like wings rapidly. Its long bronze fingernails grabbed at Rachel's neck. Rachel closed her eyes, focused deeply, and thought of only the moment, and then there was only the moment.

Time had stopped. The creature stood before her with its tiny red hands pressed forward towards her neck. Rachel grabbed the creature and savagely flung it to the ground. She stepped fully on its small body and pushed her full weight into it. Its body was gooey and pliable, like an insect. A screeching noise emanated from the creature, and it burst into flames. Apparently, this was a small harmless demon and was simply meant to cause mischief. Since she had dispelled the disgusting demonic creature, Rachel allowed "time" to move forward normally once again.

She turned her attention quickly towards the fruit tree. While Rachel had been preoccupied with the demon, Satan had been able to work his devilry on Eve. She was reaching towards the Tree of Knowledge to get a piece of fruit. The serpent, Satan, smiled innocently. Rachel cried out.

"Stop!" she said, stepping out of the underbrush. Shocked, Eve turned towards Rachel and gasped. Eve sheepishly looked back at Satan. Confusion creased Eve's brow, and she quickly grabbed the fruit from the branch. The serpent smiled, showing its cheeks fully puffed out. Clearly, this creature was an angel, very similar to the Cherubim. Rachel tried to toughen the expression on her face; she had to appear fierce and commanding. She strode over to the tree and stood between Satan and Eve.

"Do not eat from this tree, Eve, for this creature, this fallen angel, only means to deceive you," Rachel said, glaring distastefully at Satan.

"Deceive! Never, why would I lie?" Satan cried with innocence.



“So you can do wrong to humanity. You’re the enemy of God, and of man. You hate mankind because God gave us control of the Earth. And now, you’re just making fun of God. You would have tempted Eve and had her eat this fruit. Well, I won’t let you do that. I am here to stop you. I damn you back to Hell!” Rachel said. Her cheekbones flexed, and her voice rose with utter contempt. She was trying to sound as impetuous as she could.

“Hell?” Eve said, still frightened. “What is this Hell? The serpent seems to mean no harm.”

“The creature lies to you. If you eat this fruit, you will lose what you cherish the most. You will see things that you’ve never seen before, and know things you’ve never known. You are better where you are now. Trust me, I know,” Rachel said, placing her hand on Eve’s shoulder.

“Don’t listen to her, Eve,” the serpent said, smiling innocently. “She’s wrong. I don’t want control of the Earth. I am the ruler of the Earth already. I have been bound here by the Lord above. But he has sent me to help you, to guide you. Now eat of the fruit, and you will see all and be like Gods, or more!”

The obsidian eyes of the devil grew even brighter, and both Rachel and Eve moaned. An intangible stimulation gripped both of them. Rachel could feel the heat in her loins; it was intoxicating, but she resisted. She closed her eyes and focused her energy on slowing down the passage of time. Rachel meditated intently for a moment and opened her eyes to face Satan, who seemed to be frozen right where he was. Had it worked? There was only one way to tell. She had only a few moments to act.

Rachel rushed over to one of the other trees as Satan and Eve turned ever so slowly to watch her. Rachel broke one of the sharp thistle branches off from the tree and examined it. It was as sharp as any steak knife. A painfully nostalgic recollection of Cameron’s death flashed through her mind. For a moment, Rachel hesitated as she bore the sharp thistle in her hand. She sighed deeply and went forward.

‘You have to do this,’ she thought. ‘Don’t fail again.’

She moved closer to Satan and noticed that the devil was moving exceptionally slower than herself. Even in the slowness of the moment, the feeling of seduction was potent, and chills rippled through her body. Erotica pulsed throughout her body with a disorienting throb. She could feel the evil coursing through her veins. Her murderous intent was amplified. Rachel sneered and moved closer to Satan, putting her arms around the serpent’s smooth scales. Lust and wrath created a deadly mix and gave Rachel a terrible driving force.

“Satan, darling, pride may be your sin, but it isn’t ours!” she said, using all her effort to resist the erotica radiating from the fallen angel. The serpent tried to react, but Rachel’s possession of time forced him to move too slowly. Rachel pressed herself into the serpent and rubbed her already aroused body parts against the devil. She could feel herself being lost in his erotic games but hardened her expression. She continued to taunt and tease; Rachel was very capable when it came this.

She kissed the face of the devil and licked the scales with her tongue. Oddly enough, she did not feel revulsion, but felt further magnetized and powerfully allured. Suddenly, she noticed the devil’s obsidian eyes were fading, and the cheeks had become soft and pliable. The serpent’s slow hissing noises tantalized the air with the hypnotic sensation of a lullaby. Had she relaxed the devil? Had she seduced him into a false sense of security? No time to test that!

Rachel curled her lip, and pure rage entered her heart. She remembered this rage. She had felt it once before when she drove the knife into Cameron’s neck. Even though Rachel remembered Cameron’s death as an act of self defense, a certain murderous wrath was still required to do such a thing. To Rachel, it was a murder; it took all the pretense and emotional breakdown that occurs during the moment of murder. She had done it once before and fully realized the brutal emotion needed to commit such an act. That same murderous rage returned. Rachel screamed like a warrior in heat. She raised the sharp thistle branch and drove it deeply into the chest of the devil.

There would have been a cry of incalculable anguish from the serpent, but time moved too slowly for that to happen. Rachel stabbed at him again and again in a fitful pernicious fury. Rachel’s mouth contorted in a fit of anger. Her eyes were lit with the wild fire of bloodshed. Vengeance poured out of her as she cleaved the serpent. All the pain she had ever felt came to the surface; all the destructive energy within Rachel rose up. Rachel thought of more than just her quest. Much of the anguish she had felt was released. The act of killing gave her a greater thrill than she thought it would, and it horrified her. Finally, she had plunged the natural weapon countless times into the serpent’s body. Blood was dripping, oozing, slowly from the entire wounds she caused.

Rachel sighed again, and took several steps away from the serpent. Her hands were covered in gooeey blood, and she cried out at what she had done, realizing the evil that infested her. She looked at the creature in horror. She touched her own hand in great disgust and screamed.

"I've done it again. I've murdered," Rachel said in disappointment.

Drowsiness came over Rachel, and time moved at its normal rate again as Rachel uncontrollably released it from her commands. Blood spurted forth in great quantities from the devil and covered Rachel in dark maroon liquid. Rachel fell back in quieting disgust. A deafening screech came from Satan as a bright blinding light beamed out towards the sky from its guts. The devil exploded, and its carnal body parts flew in all directions. The scaly armor of the serpent shed away with a hissing sound. The scales cracked as the body ignited into flames. A formidable light remained, and almost immediately, this light rocketed upwards and flew high above to the heavens. Moments before, the deceitful snake was whole, but now its remains were scattered beneath the tree in a myriad of segments. Rachel thought of Belliano's violent death. The devil had killed him, and Rachel had fittingly caused nearly the same violence to the devil.

"I avenge you, my friend," she said quietly.

Rachel turned towards Eve, who stood in shock and dumfounded horror. Rachel moved towards Eve, but faltered, and realized she was consumed by weakness. Rachel stumbled towards the ground in front of her, losing consciousness. The last thing Rachel saw was Eve fainting to the ground to the ground in front of her. As awareness drained from Rachel, only one thought pervaded her entire being: "I won, I won paradise". Then blackness, utter blackness.

\* \* \*

"Mother! MOTHER!" I screamed.

"Rachel, I'm here, it's okay, it's okay," she comforted. It was really her, it was really my mother! How could this be?

"Darling, it's all going to be alright, I'm here with you now. You've done the right thing, you know. You've done what I asked," she said.

"Mom, mom," I said. I couldn't help it, but tears poured down my face. My heart pounded. I felt like I was going to explode. "Mom, mom, where have you been?"

"I'm always with you, but your time isn't over yet," she said gently, smiling.

"Mom," I said, reaching out towards her. There she was! Right in front of me. It was our old place in Pennsylvania. She was standing there smiling, baking a batch of cookies like she always did. She had her

flowered apron on and that warm smile I can't forget. "Mom, I've wanted to tell you how unhappy I've been. I have so much I need to tell you. Can't I stay with you?"

"No, honey," she said, chuckling heartily. "You can't stay, not now. We'll be together some day, I know we will. But not right now. Your time is not done yet."

"What do you mean, Mom, 'my time'? MOM!" I yelled as she started to fade. She looked like a ghost, some ethereal spirit, and she was just whisking away!

NO! I didn't want her to go—

"Who are you?" a man said, as Rachel's breath came back to her suddenly. She felt like she had been sucked through a massive tunnel and dumped out onto the ground in front of her. "Who are you?"

Rachel was staring into Adam's clean-shaven face, which was only inches away. Rachel forced her eyes closed to clear her head. An after image of her mother appeared in her mind, and Rachel popped her eyes open again. Only Adam's face was in front of her. Adam's breath passed over her skin, and it snapped her out of the trance-like dreamscape.

"Rachel, my name's Rachel," she said hoarsely.

"I am Adam," he said. Rachel smiled and juttet her hand up towards Adam. Adam grasped her hand and pulled Rachel to her feet.

"I know who you are," she said.

"Did God send you?" Adam asked innocently.

"No, I have not been sent by God," Rachel said, laughing. Adam looked confused.

"What was that thing there that you stabbed and destroyed?" Adam asked innocently, but with an inherent fear in his eyes.

"It was your enemy, Adam, the devil known as Satan. He would have tempted you to eat from that tree, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. If you ate from that tree, you would have gained awareness, but also, you would have condemned all your decedents to live without paradise," Rachel explained. "But I have saved you now; humanity is saved! You will not be cast out from Eden." Rachel smiled and put a soothing hand on Adam's shoulder. Adam smiled.

“Yes, yes! God warned us not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, lest we die. Now I know what the Lord meant by this. He would have turned us away from Eden. And then we would have no longer been able to eat from Tree of Life that lets us live forever. Surely, we would die, as the Lord said. The beastly angel that protects the Tree of Life, the Cherubim, would have taken us from this great garden, and locked its gates forever to us. But now we may live here evermore,” Adam said. He held onto her arm and bent his knees at her feet, bowing down before her. “Rachel, you are our savior. You have protected us and given us immortality for all time! Rachel, our warrior, our savior. Thank you for letting us see the way of the Lord!” He kissed her hands very lightly many times. Rachel chuckled.

“Adam, Adam, don’t kneel down before me,” she said. “I’m just a kid, I’m fulfilling the destiny that was set down before me. This was my purpose, I believe. God is the one you worship, so stand up and look around at this beautiful garden and know that your children, the race of humanity, will live forever in peace here.”

“Your words are those of a goddess to us, but I understand your lesson. I will not worship you, but I shall give thanks to the Lord for our good fortune. I must ask, though, what land did you come from?” Adam said, innocent curiosity bustling in his voice. Rachel put her hand up in a silencing fashion.

“I can’t tell you where. Just know that I came to you, and I would prefer that you don’t even try to speculate where I was from. Simply tell your descendents that you were strong at resisting the devil, and that you did not let him get the best of you. I think I should go now though, before I say much more,” Rachel said with a sense of urgency in her voice. She realized that her mission was completed; Belliano’s instructions had been carried out, and paradise was won, despite the bloody means that were required. Any more interference in the history of humanity could be detrimental. As God had given Adam and Eve free will, she must also give them the ability to choose. Filling their heads with ideas of the future would be disastrous. Rachel felt that she had already said enough.

“Listen to me, now,” Rachel said, directing her glance to Eve who had risen groggily and sat underneath the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. “Don’t tell anyone about me. If you do, you may jeopardize everything you hold dear. Will you do this for me, Eve, Adam?”

Adam moved towards Eve and touched her still naked shoulder. Rachel smiled, musing at the idea that all humans would remain naked forever without the knowledge from that tree.

“Yes, Rachel, we certainly will try!” Eve said, standing up to kiss Rachel’s cheek. “We will pass on the knowledge of this tree and the story of the devil to those who come after us.”

“Good, good!” Rachel said. “Well, Adam and Eve, good luck, and God Bless!” Rachel slowed time just enough so that she would seem to disappear in front of Adam and Eve. Rachel darted off into the bushes, leaving Adam and Eve under the tree. Their arms raised in the air as they bid Rachel farewell.

Rachel moved quickly through the fresh air of this paradise, the Garden of Eden. She heard a voice echo across the garden: “Rachel, come to the center. Come!” Out of curiosity, Rachel ran towards the voice, towards the center of the garden, wondering who had beckoned her. She thought that the Tree of Life was at the center of the garden and wondered why a strange voice was summoning her there. The beastly Cherubim reappeared, dropping down abruptly from the sky, its wings fully spread and flapping before her. It stood in Rachel’s path and produced its sword of flames.

“Rachel, prancer of the shadows, welcome,” the Cherubim said, passing the sword of flames before her like a toll booth gate. Beyond the Cherubim’s flaming sword, Rachel saw a grand tree that rose indefinitely into the sky. The beastly angel looked ready for a fight and Rachel took a defensive stance. She was ready to turn around and run away, but just then, the angel spoke.

“Rachel Potastriali, the Lord and Master of this Universe sees all. The Almighty Lord grants you a gift. Eat of the fruit and live forevermore. But be certain that as you eat from this fruit, ye shall be aware that difficult choices lay ahead of you, many more of which you have not yet conceived. You came to the garden of Eden to escape great consequences. Now the decision is upon you: do you return to your own world to face this reality or stay here in this slice of heaven?” the angel said with a voice that sounded more like a recording than its own voice. It was as if the Cherubim was delivering a message. Rachel backed away from the tree and looked thoughtfully at the angel. She was shocked by the intimate knowledge that the creature had of her own life.

“Is that the word of God?” Rachel asked. Lowering the flaming sword, the Cherubim nodded in affirmation.

“I am in the service of our Lord God for all time, and that is His word,” the angel responded.

“I see,” said Rachel grimly. She reached for the Tree of Life and plucked off one of its fruits with her right hand, gripping it in between her fingers. Briefly, she stared at the fruit and then looked back at the

Cherubim, standing proudly and fiercely, ready to defend the Tree of Life with its flaming sword. She waved at the angel, and the beastly Cherubim waved back at her.

Rachel slowly ran towards the edges of Eden. She continued until she reached the valley overlooking the river once again. It was still daylight, and much more of the landscape was visible. Rachel realized that there were other distant mountains nestled in the mists. Rachel still wondered if this place existed on the Earth or on another realm, another parallel existence. That was unclear to her, but it was of little consequence.

There were other thoughts on Rachel's mind. She had accomplished her quest, and it was time to make a choice, as the Cherubim had said. Rachel remembered Belliano's words: "Whatever you do, don't forget to take the box next to the controls with you! It is the only thing that can bring you back."

Rachel reached into her pocket where the control device still remained. She held onto it with her left hand. This was her ticket home. She held the small apple-shaped fruit in her right hand, the fruit of immortality. The fruit appeared quite plain. It was more majestic when it hung delicately from the tree.

Rachel stood long in contemplation and deep thought, basking in the bright sun. She looked across the great river, flowing endlessly into the horizon. This land possessed such vastness, in between mountains peaks that seemed endless. Rachel could have lingered there forever, but her heart was plagued with the process of decision making.

Paradise was behind her, an entire new world of earthly delights. Rachel came to Eden to desperately escape a world of dark things. Now she beheld pathways to immortality and a lifetime of utter paradise. She dreaded returning to a world where she had murdered someone. Her reality was filled with pain, but here, in the garden, all those troubles faded away.

Although bathed in the blissful sun of the place far from reality, Rachel could not help but think about people she left behind. She thought of how much she missed her parents and hated her aunt. Rachel thought of Marty; she wanted him right there with her. All the things she had sworn to forget in this place crept back. The mission was complete, and her sense of duty was disappearing. Loneliness crept up on her like a hand from the grave. She felt cold even though the warm sun beat down.

Who would keep Rachel company here in Eden? Adam? Eve? No, she would not be able to associate with them. She had to leave them alone, and Rachel realized that if she chose to stay in Eden, it would be a lonely paradisiacal existence.

Rachel missed her parents most of all. She dropped the fruit and the control device to the ground, and pulled the locket from her pocket. She screamed aloud into the echoing hills. No one returned her screams, nothing answered. The valley was hollow. Suddenly, the orchard's beauty was false and sinewy to her, as if someone made it up and carved it all out of wax. Rachel knew what she had to do. She had to return to her own world, even though she had come here to escape from that world. She could not escape the fact that her parents had died. They were still dead; they would not magically come back. She would have to face Cameron's murder, somehow. Most of all, she wanted to return to the loving arms of Marty.

She tried to fight tears, but could not. Rachel shoved the locket back in her pocket; she could barely stand to look at it any longer. She picked up the device and held it firmly. Rachel looked at the fruit in her other hand and smiled viciously. 'What the hell,' she thought. She bit deeply into the fruit, leaving her teeth marks in it. Rachel smiled; it tasted like a combination of mango and pineapple. Very good! She consumed the fruit until nothing was left but the core. Would she live forever now? Who knows. Who cares. But at least that was over with, and she could focus on more important things.

Rachel walked around the garden slowly, soaking in all the elegance of the silken orchard. Would she ever be in such a place as beautiful again? She thought of Belliano and the walk he took with her through the misty woods in the graveyard. She had finished Belliano's quest, and had seen his work to its end.

Who knew what kind of world she would be returning to? She had changed humanity, so perhaps it would be a better place when she went back. She might even see Eden again since humanity had never been cast out. She vowed return to this very paradise. Rachel smiled. All her family and any others could come live here, in this garden. Rachel ran through the garden, twirling around. Belliano's dream would come true, and mankind could experience blissful utopia.

Rachel pulled out the control device with no fear of return to the murderous, death-ridden world she had left behind. The decision was clear, and it was time for Rachel to return to the real world and face



her life as an adult. She unhooked the plastic covering over the dark red button of the metallic box and depressed the button.

Instantly, bolts of electricity surged through her body with incapacitating current. Tingles ran up her spine and through her legs. She let out a cry of anguish, but nothing came out of her mouth. Was she dying? In front of her, a blue flame emerged. It engulfed her body.

A horrifying thought rushed through her mind as she lost consciousness: what if humanity did not turn out like Belliano thought it would? What would happen if she somehow changed things for the worst? Maybe she meddled in affairs that needed no meddling. No, that could not be possible. Belliano was right! All the suffering in the world would be averted. She prevented the greatest temptation of all time. How could preventing temptation be a bad thing?

The electrical current passed through her body quickly, and the blue flames blurred her vision. Rachel cocked her head back, shivering from the electricity passing through her body. Her blue eyes squinted, and she noticed something that looked like angels standing all throughout the perfectly clear blue sky. There were hundreds, nay thousands, of winged creatures flying around in a great fuss. Rachel struggled to get a closer look, trying to see past the blue and white glow that swarmed around her. A unified sound rushed forth from the heavens, the sound of a thousand mournful chants. Sad cries burst forth from the sky, and the angels sang a great tune of sorrow in their heavenly choir. Rachel's body jerked and her eyes rolled. The moans rose higher and higher, throwing Rachel into a panicked state of depression. She had never heard anything so sad. If it were not for the electricity coursing through her body, she certainly would have fallen helplessly to the ground from the utter melancholy conveyed in the heavenly tune ...

"Mother!" I cried. Where was she? Blackness all around me now, and not a single star or tree or angel were in the sky. What happened? Where was I? What the—

"Rachel, darling," a voice echoed all around. The sound was deafening. My mother appeared in front of me. Mom, it's really you! She was so beautiful. But, wait I hear something else, there's another voice. No! Something else is here with my mother. Mom, no no, don't let it get closer to you. Mom, I need you!

“Rachel, darling,” two voices chimed. What’s that there?! A winged creature, it’s rising behind that beautiful ghost of my mother. Look, it’s enclosing her with its wings. Mom! What’s wrong? I can sense the danger. Mom, don’t let it hurt you. Its wings are all over you, oh no! Look at how hideous it is! Damn these tears, I hate crying.

“Rachel, DARLING,” the winged creature mocked. It was laughing at me. “Rachel, ‘darling, pride may be your sin, but it’s not ours’” It kept saying that over and over! There’s other voices too, all chiming in. Stop it, those are my words. You’re Satan, aren’t you? What are you doing here? Get away from my mother! Stop it! Its voice is getting so low, so scary. That laugh! Where have I heard that laugh?

“Rachel, ‘darling, pride may be your sin, but it’s not ours’. Heard that before? Ha ha ha. Perhaps you should have thought about what you did before you acted,” the creature continued. No! Don’t slash my mom’s arm like that. You’ll hurt her. How dare you hurt my mother, you bastard! The creature’s talking again. Oh, its voice is so horrible.

“Don’t let the hasty choices you’ve made be the end of you. You still have a chance. After all, you did what you thought was right. Yes, Rachel. Don’t let anyone tell you what you did was wrong. Be *proud* of what you did,” its voice echoed sarcastically. No no, ahh, the electricity is running through me. I can’t talk. Can’t do anything. What kind of vision is this? I’m helpless. I can’t do anything. They’re gone now, gone into the darkness. And Satan, that was surely Satan. He has my mom! Mom, where are you?

You’re gone. Damn it, I’m crying again. I hate tears. I never wanted to cry this much. Why am I crying? Am I ever gonna wake up from this dream?

## Chapter 7

### The Flaw of Future Paradise

The dreams continued for hours. Thoughts of the winged demon raced through Rachel's mind. She felt unending pain, utter anguish. She was bombarded with torturous scenes; could it be Hell that she was being shown? Was this her judgment for trying to trick the devil? She should have known that the devil would seek revenge. And now, her mother was in danger. Well, perhaps it was more accurate to say that her mother's soul was in danger, since her mother was already dead. Is that what she had seen? Her mother's soul in being kidnapped by the devil?

The dreams finally subsided like a calming throb of a once fast-racing heart. Rachel found herself laying on a hard metallic floor. She quickly thrust her hands to the floor and propped herself up.

"I'm back, I'm back," Rachel whispered, reassuring herself. She sat staring at the mystical archway that was her vessel to Eden. Rachel lay underneath the arching portal, legs sprawled out. Rising to her feet, Rachel faltered with dizziness and staggered to the doorway of the tomb. The box she had used to activate the machine was still tightly clutched in her hand. Rachel made her way through the doorway and down the stone stairwell.

Upon leaving the tomb, Rachel realized that it was night time. How long had she been away? After all that had happened, Rachel had completely lost track of days. In Eden, time seemed utterly inconsequential to existence. She tensed her legs and commanded them to speed through the darkened graveyard. She soared through the woods and could smell all the natural modern day imperfections that did not exist in the paradise.

Rachel crushed over the sinewy matted grass at her feet and fought like a lost puppy to find the way to her mother's grave. However, there were no graves, no gravestones anywhere. In fact, there were no gates, no pathways, no signs of civilization; this place was a barren ocean of dark trees that draped above like monsters. The ground was so rugged and un-worked that one wondered if there ever been a graveyard at all. This was a far different landscape compared to the earthly paradise she had just come from.

The forest was devoid of any structures, save Belliano's tomb. Rachel had wandered far, and her vessel of Edenly travel was behind her by leaps and bounds. Nothing was the same. Rachel looked on for something that she would recognize but found only unfamiliar landscapes and a vast forest of imperfect

wood. For an hour, she must have searched every unchanging corner of the forest for any signs of intelligent life. She was going around in circles.

Rachel's desire to return home grew, but there was no end to this woodland abyss. Rachel was lost amongst the darkness. Only speckles of moonlight and stars eerily broke through the trees to provide some resemblance of light. She spotted a tree in the distance and decided to rest her head against it. It was a huge, sagging oak tree that most certainly ruled the woods with great wisdom, its bark telling the stories of several millennia long since past. 'Another damned oak tree', Rachel thought. Tears slowly edged their way down Rachel's face, and within moments, the salt water ushered forth in multitudes. Would Rachel ever be free from the ocean of tears?

"I'm lost, I'm so lost and cold now," Rachel said, talking to no one. She pulled her knees up against her chest, shivering at the cold air that pressed against her skin. Soon the tears ceased, and a quiet delirium took their place. Her face had reddened and become sticky with dried sobs. Rachel cocked her head around and looked at the mass of trees. These trees were the only living companions she had now. Could she coexist with a race of trees? Rachel Potastriali and the tree people? How grand would that be?

With no signs of modern civilization or utterance of mortal breath, Rachel found consolation in this giant wise old oak tree that gave her back a rest. Nature was her new mother. Her brothers were the trees; her sisters were the grass. Yes, she could have a family of nature! What a wonderful new paradise they would make, the trees, the grass, and Rachel—

CRACK! A twig snapped. Chills imploded from Rachel's arms to her stomach. Her shoulders tensed. Hair stood up on her neck. Someone was there, no, something! A distinct presence loomed behind her. Rachel did not move; the trees would protect her, wouldn't they? This old wise oak would certainly not let anything happen to her, now would it.

SNAP! An entire branch broke in the woods from high above. SPLASH! It had fallen into some distant darkened babbling brook. Another crack! Rachel curled up and tightened her shrunken posture even more. There was only darkness, but then why did the tree have a shadow? The shadow grew longer. A light was approaching. Then an eerie cool breeze blew by. Rachel had felt this type of breeze before in Eden.

But this was not paradise. This was the earth; this was her reality, even though it was completely unreal to her. How could she think of paradise in this downtrodden dirt-filled trench? Where the hell had

Rachel gone? How could such a paradise even exist when there were such drab woodland scenes? Paradise had been lost. Rachel reminded herself over and over again that she was in the wooded reality of earth. This was no lush garden, but a prickly dirt-encrusted soot-covered middle ground. A place for living between heaven and hell. Oh, how she yearned for that still serene paradise! Why had she ever left? She should have stayed.

A great gush of wind pressed past her shoulders, as if the breeze was alive and slithering by her. Only once before had she felt these sensations. Without even standing, she knew. She knew what would soon appear in front of her. The gloomy light edged closer and closer to the tree. Finally, it passed around the tree and slithered in front of her. In all its smug and slippery glory, the serpent, Satan, stood there. But Rachel's mouth jutted open in wonder at its appearance. This devil, her enemy, was no scaly creature. In fact, he was finely dressed in a regal satin gown fit for a king. And then he spoke!

"Gracious shaper of human destiny," is all Satan, the devil, said. Then he bowed. His voice was elegant and refined, deep and majestic, quite unlike the creature she had seen in Eden who could barely hiss the tones of her language. Rachel stared in horror. Dozens of questions plagued her mind. What happened to humanity? Where was the graveyard? Why was it so dark, and why were the trees so deceiving? But she only asked one question.

"What have you done with my mother?" Rachel said quietly, a fury buried deep within. Satan smiled.

"Rachel, your mother has been taken with me. Her soul is mine," Satan said, pausing to chuckle as his eyes glittered in the light that accompanied his presence. "She is safe with me, as safe as any soul can be that will be forever tortured! Her visions and constant ghostly communication with you had to be stopped. After all, she was your last hope in this world. Now, you are nothing, Rachel. There is no one here, no one to help you or save you but these blasted trees! There is no Domino Belliano! And I tell you, even the trees will turn their backs on you. Don't trust them!"

Rachel was aghast beyond tears. It seemed the devil knew her feelings, her desires, and played with them like a toddler molding play doh. Perhaps this was what the devil did best. But Rachel felt something that she did not feel before: hopelessness. And the devil knew this. She basked in the dimness of utter sorrow.

“You have nothing!” Satan emphasized. “This wood is all you have left. There are no loved ones to love any more. Love is dead. Only madness will haunt you if you seek this sort of caring now. Darkness will forever reign on earth. Even when the sun does rise, no eyes are there to see, unless the trees in this nondescript forest were to suddenly sprout eyes from their leaves. It’s the old adage brought to horrific life: if a tree falls and no one is around, who hears it fall?”

“Where is everyone? Where is the world?” Rachel finally blurted, looking away, frightened of the answer.

“Open your eyes, child of ignorance!” Satan said, lifting Rachel’s head harshly with his finger. The devil gritted his serpentine mouth quite like a human. “See the world you made!”

“I— *I* made!” Rachel said, gasping. She jerked her head away from the devil’s finger, and tried to move away but could not because the oak tree rested behind her. “I didn’t—.”

“Spare me your smug doubts, beautiful child, worthless one! Or do you claim ignorance now? I think that’s what you do; you choose to claim ignorance for your actions. You don’t accept the responsibility for the consequences, you never have. You were always trying to escape, find some easy way out. Now you have followed through with your mission. You jabbed the thorny thistle deep into the devil’s chest, into my chest, but I didn’t die. We’re immortal, you know. We can’t die, though we can still be hurt. Injuries sentence us to other realms of existence. I returned to my dark hell, the deep abyss that God created for me and my kind. And your quest was a success. You’ve done it! Aren’t you happy with the results?” Satan said cynically, pausing to smile for a moment. He motioned at the dark woods with both his slithery hands. He continued.

“But that was in another place, another time, another world. How could you know all this? How is it—,” Rachel began.

“It was another time, another place, as you say, but I still remember. It was not so long ago for a fallen one, a castaway angel, like myself. It was not so long ago that a girl pranced into the garden of Eden with all her wonderful courage and curiosity. Of course, how was the unsuspecting recently fallen serpent to know what hit him? All the serpent knew was that he had to fight his war against God. And I did, didn’t I? Of course, I couldn’t intervene. I could only watch. After all, that’s what we angels are, whether banished from heaven or not. We are only watchers. We need you humans to help us. And you, Rachel,

have been my greatest helper. You've made all this possible! I can't thank you enough, for you have filled my cold heart with such bitter sweetness."

He bowed again, curtsying fully this time like a gentleman, his head nodding forward.

"I don't understand!" Rachel screamed. "This is crazy!" Tears streamed down her face again; rage consumed the flushed, red, pulsing temples of her forehead. "Belliano had to be right! I know I wasn't doing anything wrong. What happened? Where are all the people? Give me back my mother, you bastard!"

The devil spewed forth a hideous, hidden laugh that ushered from deep within the body of the dark fallen angel.

"Oh, I see how it is now. Whine about your mother and her petty little soul. Her soul was a pure annoyance, I tell you! Do you know how annoying souls are that constantly go back to earth so they can 'impart knowledge' to loved ones? Damn her, she's mine now. I have some power over those that have left their earthly confines. And listen to you, whining some more. 'What happened to all those people?' *You* are the one that tempted the devil, and even foiled the devil at his own plan. But it backfired! Play with evil and evil you get! It spit back in your face, ushering from the fires of hell itself.

"Yes, my dear, it was you! You, Rachel Potastriali, stopped Eve from eating that fateful forbidden fruit. And by plucking that fruit from her like sucking the fruit of her loins, you imbibed the seed that would *be* humanity. You destroyed what God had given man. You stripped man of his free will!"

Rachel's muscles tightened and tension surged through her body. She started sweating; she hated this creature! The rage kindled in the hearth of Rachel's heart, and she wanted the fire to lash out of its cage. The devil spoke again.

"That's what happened, you see, Rachel. You saved humanity from their own ability to choose. You chose for them, and by doing that, you took it upon yourself to play God. How petty and ironic God's infinite plan was in the end anyway. Maybe your friend, Belliano, had a point; God had no idea what he was doing. Humanity came full circle. Inevitably, every human was given a choice, but you chose to take away another's power to choose. What bitter irony indeed! You chose for Eve. The devil's demise was also the demise of choice! I love saying these catchy phrases and degrading you to the bone! Don't you see? By choosing, you ushered in a new era for humanity," Satan said, laughing sardonically.

Rachel sat horrified against the tree, tears drying on her face and dribbling out of her eyes. She looked around again and tried not to think upon the fact that she was alone with this evil creature in a dark wood. The devil and her. What a frightening thought! Even though her confidence and powers had overwhelmed the devil in Eden, she could not summon the same strength now. There was no possibility for hope. The flaming confident rage hid itself inside, deep inside her, until only the fear remained. Her courage became a timid little rabbit in a cage with a wolf just outside.

“Does that frighten you, Rachel? Does it scare you to know that you caused the end of humanity? Does it baffle you that humanity never saw the birth of Christ? Or does it confound you that without the ability to choose, people became lifeless and barbaric?”

“Birth of Christ? If it never happened, then how do you even know about it? You can’t know all this. It’s not possible. I don’t believe you!” Rachel screamed out. The serpentine creature chuckled hideously.

“Did your mentor, Belliano, teach you nothing? Ah, I will enlighten your feeble mind. How in the world do I know these things, you ask? How can I possibly know about things that existed in other ‘times, places, and worlds’? Well, let’s just say that it’s part of our angelic anathema, the curse of the Stars, if you will. In all my angelic grace, I can see beyond space and time, envisioning all the time lines and dimensions that humanity would fashion. Yet, I am powerless to act. Sadly, we angels are puppets of God. And, being cast down, I am here on the Earth co-mingling amongst your execrable kind. So it is you humans that give me the ability to enact free will. Through you, I act. That is why I must enlist the help of those like yourself.

“Speaking of free will, you should have seen what happened to the divine forefathers of humanity. Shortly after you left the garden, Adam and Eve commenced with their instinctual animal-like human mating and barbarically bore the children of the world. Those children never clothed, and remaining naked. They never advanced in thought, philosophized, dreamed, or built anything. They slept under the stars in their bare skin. But they were never cast out of paradise, and of course, they lived eternally in God’s bliss.

“But, oh, God said, ‘Since Rachel came and chose for the father and mother of the world, let these children of Adam choose their own fates now’. And do you know what they chose, Rachel? They chose to follow the law set down for them by the Lord. They understood the danger of eating from the tree and



*never* did they eat from it. They worshipped you, Rachel, like a goddess who had fallen from the sky. Even though you told them and warned them not to worship you, they still could not resist! Humans need that, I think. They need some idolatry, some mystically unexplained being to consecrate. Eventually, God became a secondary deity to them; they worshipped you instead. But like the death of any religion, one day they even stopped that worship.

“Everyone lived long and immortal lives in paradise, as each generation ate from the Tree of Life. That little beastly Cherubim never forbade them, as long as God permitted it, of course. And whenever the people wanted to hear a good tale, they came back to their great father and mother. They asked Adam and Eve what they saw on the day that you became their heroine. Well, finally, after generations and millennia of this belief, people started to wonder what you looked like and if you ever truly existed. And then, it was revealed that Eve had painted you,” Satan continued, telling the tale with obvious great pleasure.

He flung his hand very lightly to his side. A painting illuminated a few feet away like a spot light had just been shined down on it from the heavens. It was a crudely painted picture that used natural pigments like berries and sulfur. The picture depicted Rachel running in the woods with a great playful smile on her face. Behind it were two large trees. One of the trees was darkened, and one was lightened. It was Rachel, with a thistle in her hand, in the luscious Garden of Eden. It looked like a child’s rendering of what she had seen and done.

“So Eve painted you, but her descendents started to question their belief. They would not blindly follow something that was mere hear-say. They needed to see it with their own eyes. And henceforth, they lost faith. The truth of your visit soon faded, and people quickly built up a rebellion against what was known as the ‘Common Belief’. In time, all the immortal children of Adam were convinced that their esteemed father and mother had lied. So, one day in a great procession through the heavenly land of paradise, the children of Adam marched towards the tree and demanded the truth from Adam and Eve.

“Adam said, ‘Rachel, traveler from another place, came to save us and tell us our destinies. She stopped us from sinning and stopped us from listening to the devil. We must all learn from her efforts and fearlessness’.

“Cain, one of the first children of Adam, spoke now. ‘Oh, father, these are lies! We cannot listen to this anymore. We desire the knowledge now. We need to know. We want to know this Rachel as you do. Certainly, if we eat from this grand Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, we would know.’

“Eve gasped in horror. ‘You may not,’ she said. ‘It is forbidden by God! Is that not the point of Rachel’s travels?’.

“Cain sneered at Eve and said, ‘God? God’s power seems weak compared to Rachel. We hear you only speak of Rachel, the great messenger from another realm. It seems that Rachel blocks us from our path to God, our rightful path to knowledge. Now, step aside mother of children, we will have the knowledge!’.

“And, Adam and Eve, never dealing with an insurrection of this sort, stepped aside at their son’s bidding. They abhorred violence, and Cain was of their kin. It was Cain who ate from the Tree of Knowledge first, and then instructed his brothers, Abel and Seth, to follow him. Soon all the Children of Adam did so. Within moments, all generations under Adam realized they were naked and rushed into the woods to clothe themselves. They looked around and saw the meat of animals and slaughtered them. What vicious barbarians they were. I am so glad you prolonged humanity’s tasting of the tree, so as to heighten the sweet violence that came after the first tasting. From the knowledge came such vicious enlightenment.

“Of course, God ushered them away from paradise, through the bushy gate, past the Cherubim. Humanity was inevitably cast out of Eden, including Adam and Eve. But this time, it was thousands of humans. They were all banished in great masses, but not all at once. Some humans still remained scattered across Eden. However most were sent to the inferior realms of the earth that you sit upon now. Their immortality was stripped away as a penalty for their sin, and as God promised, they would surely die now, just a matter of when.

“And then, of course, the humans needed some sort of instruction, some kind of guidance. That’s where my companions come in, the angels who had been cast out from heaven. You call them the ‘fallen angels’. Maybe I call them enlightened. Oh, how the choirs of heaven cried out on that day! The accusing angels flocked to the Earth so they could instruct human beings in what has been dubbed the ‘infernal arts’. Human beings had to find a way to protect themselves against all the evils that they were now suddenly aware of, and the angels of accusation provided them with that guidance. After all, the ‘fallen angels’ were there to help.”

The serpent paused and smiled sadistically.

“After that, the knowledge of murder and war were common place. Whole societies were formed for the purpose of domination, control, and destruction of anyone else in their way. Lust and jealousy were rampant. Sin, as God would have it called, was ever-present throughout the world. I thought it was a pretty happening party, if you ask me.”

The devil laughed heartily, his banter echoing through the dark wood.

“Cain was outraged at Adam, his own father. He accused Adam of being a false leader and blamed him for being cast out of paradise. Ah, what a pitiful little man Adam was, but that is no matter. What mattered is that Cain convinced his brothers to commit acts of great treason against their own mother and father. One night, he gathered up his brothers and several cohorts who were still surviving in their mortal life. He claimed that the mother and father tricked them into eating from the wrong tree, that they had eaten from a tree of destructiveness and banishment. Cain gave great speeches denouncing the goodness of Adam and Eve, saying that they were hiding the true nature of the tree so that they could maintain rule. Cain claimed that the mother and father were creatures of deceit and masqueraded as progenitors of goodness.

“Oh, how popular Cain was. That’s when I came in! Oh yes, how could I resist? God’s free will was hard at work here indeed. And I thought I would push along that free will. After all, I couldn’t let the rest of the ‘enlightened angels’ have all the fun, now could I. I never thought of it as evil, really; it was just good fun and temptation. I can’t really do anything, anyway. I can only suggest, and tease, and flaunt. But that’s what I do best!

“They were all thinking the same thing anyway. They all wanted the death of the mother and father, but they knew that the mother and father were wise and had lived longer than any of them. They were afraid. Cain and his cronies weren’t even sure if it was possible to kill Adam and Eve. I just gave them a little help, that’s all. They had already made up their minds, but didn’t know how to enact their thoughts.

“So I dressed myself in a great black cloak one night and descended upon Cain in a dream. ‘Cain, son of Adam,’ I said. ‘You will see a bowl sitting on your desk in the morning. Mash up berries and fruits that you find around you. You will see a tree with sparkling vicious roots. Make sure you include these in

your brew. Feed this to your mother and father. Offer it to them as a great gift. Say that you want to repent for your sins, and that you wish forgiveness for eating from the Tree of Knowledge’.

“Of course, Cain could have killed Adam at any time, but I made him think that by feeding him this magical concoction, Adam would somehow be worse off. It was implied in the dream, of course, but really, it was just a really good fruit bowl recipe I came up with. Tastes great actually. It was a great psychological placebo to boost Cain’s confidence. He was just a novice at this killing thing. And I did give him a choice, as you see. He could have easily chosen a different path, but he was convinced that a barbaric route was necessary.

“How easy it was to influence that petty mind! Cain did exactly as I requested the next day. He rose instantly and brewed this fruity mixture in the bowl. With his brothers, and at Abel’s protest, mind you, Cain offered the mixture to his parents. They were delighted. What a faithful and forgiving son. I did not tell Cain to kill, but he did. That’s his fatal flaw. I only went so far in tempting him. After that, the wonderful brutal human will-power and desire for domination took over. The lust for knowledge and power ran wild. I just sat back and watched the show.

“Cain slit his own father’s throat the instant he finished with the berry mixture, thinking that his father would be weakened. The men raped Eve, and then her head was callously cracked and scattered. How awe-inspiring death is. And you think God did not hear or see these atrocities? Your friend, Mr. Belliano, would have been amazed at what God did next! By now, the choirs of angels in heaven cried to God in anguish. In one foul swoop, the fiery swords of the Cherubim descended upon the entire lot of men in Eden. Many were burned, but all that remained in Eden were chased out of paradise. Heaven’s fire finally cast them all out, and paradise was cleansed of the filth that is mankind. Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’ came true, Dante’s ‘Inferno’ would be their fate!

“And do you think humanity, represented by this lot of men, would change in the next millennia? Of course not! After eating from the tree, very few women could conceive children. With this knowledge came grave consequences and punishment from God: infertility. For not just one man or woman had eaten from the tree, but an entire race had done so. God’s punishment was ultimately fatal. Redemption was a rare gift. Soon, women gave their men no children at all. The men raped the women until the women were no more. The men extinguished the children born from wombs.

“A great age of darkness cast its shadow over the earth for nearly a millennia. And do you think I watched in splendor? Not at all, mind you! I only like to play with man, tempt him. They created tortures worse than hell on their own earth. They made a mess of a wonderfully playful thing. Their own free will, this precious commodity that God graciously granted humanity, destroyed them. They abused it, so the Almighty let them go to their own doom.

“Soon the men’s lusts for power, their pride, overtook them. They killed and hunted each other with the newly found arts of destruction. All the history that you knew in that other world, in the reality that you remember, ceased to exist. I was there in that other reality too; I’m an angel and I see many things, including many dimensions and time lines. I was there when the kingdoms of Egypt and the great pyramids should have been built, but instead blood was spilt across the sands of the Nile. When scrolls should have been written about philosophy and mathematics in Greece, bones were broken. I was there, hoping that mankind would move forward, but they proved disappointing in their lust for bloodshed. By the time of what you would know as the Roman Empire, all humanity ceased to exist. The Savior, the messiah, in your Christian belief never came to be. His race died before they could be born. The last human beings were slaughtered in self-genocide. I saw it all, I knew what had existed before you stopped Eve, and what had come to be. So is the nature of angels; we can see and hear but are powerless to intervene. But even I could not have predicted the horror that would ensue.”

The devil laughed his evil laugh.

“Let me tell you how all the angels screamed to God in heaven. They screamed especially loud on the day when the second to last living mortal man chased the last mortal man up the sloping Egyptian rocks of Mount Sinai. Oh, what a pity for that predatory man! The man who was being chased turned around swiftly and thrust his sword deep into his hunter’s chest. And then, realizing suddenly that he was the last man on earth, he threw himself off the mountain, and so ended the bloodshed of over two millennia. At least humanity’s bloody fire was extinguished. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, nothingness from nothingness. Hell sighed at the end of all this horror. Perdition’s gates opened and flooded with all the bloody murderous souls who would be immersed in torture for eternity. And now I, Lucifer, am the ruler of this earth, and no one can stand in my way. Humanity is gone, and their free will took them to destruction. My pride won after all.”

The devil gazed into Rachel's eyes. He no longer laughed, and sincerity washed across his face.

"And of course, it was all you who started the ball rolling. You're their bloody god, taker of free will, goddess from the future," Satan said, kneeling before Rachel and bowing his serpentine head to the ground. "It is you who populated Hell so adequately for me, and for that, I must graciously adulate you. You have built a ghastly empire beyond dreams my wildest conceptions. God does not let me have power upon the earth, but there are souls under my dominion in Hell, and that is more than I could ask. A legion of beings whose will I command. But for you, this is your future, Rachel. Look around you. This is your future paradise."

Echoes of loathsome laughter rose from the dark woods. Rachel looked around and saw the demons and souls of the murderous dead playing amongst those woods. Hell would be preferable to this version of Earth! What had she done? Demons and creatures of unrelenting evil would fill the world forever. Or would the world overflow with the utter loneliness of these damned trees that surrounded her?

Rachel felt the breeze all around her again. The devil was leaving, and the sun was rising. She heard a metal scraping noise next to her. Looking to her right, Rachel saw the devil unsheathing a sword from his belt and placing it besides her.

"Fight the fight," he whispered, the snake's voice like hissing wind. Rachel instantly felt compelled to take the sword. The rage built up in her again, that murderous furious rage coupled with a fear of loneliness and unending guilt. A frown grew like a fungus on her face. She gulped and tensed her face. Rachel quickly picked up the sword and raised it with both hands above her chest. She placed the sharp tip in between her breasts, even slightly tearing the fabric on her shirt. She closed her eyes, and prepared to press the sword deep into her rib cage.

"It's my fault, now I should end it all," Rachel said. Rachel opened her eyes and gasped.

A thousand angels stood all around her with their hands and wings folded, producing a glow no dimmer than fifty suns. No, there were not a thousand, there were million, maybe even a billion! Perhaps, for all she knew, they were all the angels in heaven! They sang a sad song, yet retained angelic innocence and beauty. Rachel had heard the song before, when she left Eden.

Rachel dropped the sword. All the angels simultaneously opened their arms. Their chants rose until the sounds blocked out any coherent thoughts. One moment, the wood was utterly soundless and now

it resounded with fluid music. Their melodic song slowly changed from sadness to high-toned peacefulness. Rachel saw the devil departing, but another great arch-angel came after the serpent, and they wrestled across the sky.

A sense of hope and serenity overcame Rachel. She grabbed onto the tree and pulled herself to her feet. Just as she looked up to gaze at the angels once more, they were all gone. All the angels in heaven! They were gone. Rachel sighed but knew what she must do. She picked up the sword, the great gleaming polished blade, and pulled the metallic box out of her pocket. She sighed and gritted her teeth with renewed determination.

“Let my anger not get the best of me but give me the strength I need!” Rachel uttered to the heavens. “Free will. Satan, you defiler! God! I’ll show you what free will can do.”

She depressed the button on the box and was thrown into electrical mayhem instantly. She was whisked away into the white-blue current and traveled to the distant paradisiacal world of Eden once again.

## Chapter 8

### Restoration Of Free Will

No dreams encased Rachel's mind this time. The currents of the apparatus shot her back to Eden in an instant. She was standing under the nighttime sky, just as she had before when she first arrived in paradise. Rachel stood firmly with the sword in her hand like a warrior maiden ready to die in battle. She rushed forward into the Garden of Eden.

Rachel had materialized in almost exactly the same place at exactly the same time as before. Rachel thought she would never return to this blissful garden; it was quite a shock to her that she returned so quickly. She smiled slightly, gazing confidently around at the silken paradise. Rachel touched several of the leaves, reveling in the smooth fresh feeling they had. She had no time for lingering, and moved on.

Rachel continued to walk around the garden, cautiously turning from side to side, ready for a demonic encounter at any moment. She did not know what to expect. A very strange thought occurred to her: would she see a virtual carbon copy of herself? After all, she had actually come here once before. Rachel squinted her eye brows, confused at these boggling ideas surrounding temporal mechanics, the particulars of which she was no expert.

She crouched behind a tree, poised like a feline on all fours, and waited. She waited for an interminable amount of time, but nothing happened. No magical copy of herself appeared. Then she recalled something Belliano had said: "Your surroundings may change but as long as you have the box, you will be protected; you will be unaffected by the changes in time and space". Rachel sighed, wondering why she hadn't thought of that before. The magical box protected its users from existing in multiple time lines. That was why no clone of herself would appear.

Rachel smiled and mused at the fact that she was the only Rachel Potastriali anywhere in the universe at this moment. She was unique and independent, transcending space and time like an angel. Domino Belliano's ingenious invention astounded her. She held the box in her hand.

"My ticket home," she whispered.

She twirled around and slid over the carpet-like grass until she came to the river overlooking the valley. This place at the edge of Eden had become a zone of deep meditation for Rachel. Perhaps this time,



she would stay for good. After all, there was no guarantee that returning to her reality would be a possibility. And this place seemed intact; paradise had not changed like her reality had.

In that moment, Rachel realized the ramifications of her decision to travel back to Eden in the first place. Had Rachel really thought she could play God and change history? Who was she to stop mankind from being tempted by the devil? Perhaps the future devil's speech actually had a good meaningful point to it, even though it was motivated by prideful evil intent. Rachel was playing with fate. Could she have been that selfish in trying to find an escape from reality? Look where it had gotten her. Her reality had been destroyed, and Rachel would be alone forever if she could not reverse the events that she put into motion.

What was Domino Belliano thinking? Ingenious as he was, there was a fatal flaw in his design. Perhaps mankind was not meant to tamper with history and the passage of time. What was done should be left alone. Maybe human beings were meant to struggle and would be forced to learn from their mistakes. History was there to help human beings make intelligent choices in the present. Rachel had taken away the ability for humanity to make those choices.

Rachel knew what she had to do. Her quest was the exact opposite from her previous journey. She was there to ensure that the fruit *was* eaten. She had come back this time to make sure Adam and Eve carried out their initial fate. It was truly ironic that this fate was considered a sin and a terrible willful act. By allowing the original sin to be Eve's decision, Rachel would actually be giving Eve a great gift. The gift of free will, the ability to choose. Rachel grabbed the sword and ran back into the garden towards the sleeping site of Adam and Eve. She would rest underneath an oak tree several feet away, just as she had before, sleeping until they woke. In frazzled exhaustion, Rachel laid her head down at the base of that tree once more, dreaming this time only of Marty and his comforting arms.

\* \* \*

Morning rushed in with the brilliance of the sun, and roused Rachel instantly. Adam and Eve had not yet risen, but Rachel knew her way to the Tree of Knowledge very well. She only had to be told where something was once, then she would find it easily every other time. She trekked down the path, hid in the bushes, and waited. She would only watch this time, and observe to make sure fate proceeded without her interference. Luckily, Belliano's time machine gave her the chance to change fate as many times as she saw fit. What a ludicrous idea. Anyone could step back here to Eden; it wasn't difficult, after all, Rachel had

done it. For a moment, Rachel realized the danger of Belliano's machine in the wrong hands. Perhaps Rachel herself wasn't even meant to use the machine. What good had she done. In fact, maybe it was meant for no one to use and was a device conceived of pure evil. It was a mad genius' invention and should be destroyed.

At that moment, Rachel heard footsteps approaching, and felt the mild presence of other beings. Adam and Eve were visible in the distance, behind the trees. They walked around the garden like innocent children, and enjoyed the wonders of sunlight and the smells of the fruit trees. Rachel overheard them speaking about something they found in the middle of the garden, near the Tree of Knowledge.

"Come hither, and see this curious picture," Eve said to Adam. "It hath rested next to the tree over there." Rachel gasped. She scurried to edge of the bushes near that tree (not far off from the Tree of Knowledge) to get a better glimpse.

"Eve, my companion, this painting, this brings wonder. God hath graced us with this gift. We should leave it here and give praise that he sent it to us," Adam said. Eve nodded in agreement and they moved on, continuing their walk. Rachel rushed over to the painting, and gazed upon the prancing woman in the woods. It was the same painting that the devil had shown her, but how had this gotten here? Technically, it had not even been painted yet! Unless it was another trick by the devil. Or perhaps Rachel never really left Eden when she returned to the future. The dark woods in the future might have *been* the Garden of Eden. Somehow, this painting had transcended space and time. Of course, that was just speculation. Rachel did not know the truth, and there were still many mysteries behind Belliano and his machine.

Rachel did not dare touch the painting. Adam and Eve would not know it was a painting of her. Even their descendents, humanity, could not possibly know that it was a painting of her. If this painting had truly transcended space and time, then who was Rachel to fool with it? Rachel had done her damage already; it was best to leave such things alone.

Then the gush of wind rushed through the garden, and the devil was on his way. Rachel took her hiding place in the bushes again, and waited to witness an exercise in the free will of man and woman. And it all played out like the stories she had read in the bible, like an artful movie or play. It was such a typical tale about devils that tempt mortals. The same kind of tale had been told in countless religions, and so here

was one of those tales enacted before her very eyes. Rachel watched thoughtfully and smiled, tucked away in the bushes.

The serpent emerged from near nothingness. Satan pressed forward and approached Eve while Adam was away, tempting her with his words. Rachel watched in wonder at the power of human free will, the power of choice. Freedom was defined in this moment. Rachel questioned the entire meaning of her quest to Eden in the first place. Was it really her fate? Was this the final outcome? What had Domino Belliano inspired in her? Looking back, Belliano was so negative about the fate of the world. Had he really thought that God did not know what he was doing? Did he really think that free will was some sort of error-filled luxury? Perhaps, it was simply the fact Domino Belliano resembled her father so much that Rachel was drawn to him. His blue eyes had given her inspiration and courage to complete his quest. She thought for sure that she would find peace from her parents' death by completing Belliano's quest.

However, she did not find peace but quite the opposite. By seeking escape, Rachel only found emptiness and loneliness. But now, Rachel stood proud and tall like a warrior. She found confidence and strength in her abilities. Perhaps that was what she was supposed to find; maybe that was her fate. Rachel fingered the locket in her pocket. Even though her mother's soul was stolen by the devil himself, Rachel's mother had been there, like a guardian angel, guiding her throughout this journey.

Could her mother's spirit transcend space and time? Her faith in Rachel was something indefinably human, the type of faith one person has in another. Her mother knew what would happen without knowing the future or even traveling time. She knew what would happen because she knew Rachel, and that Rachel would strive to do the right thing. There was no magic or scientific mastery, but only a deep understanding of her daughter and the basic goodness within her heart. Rachel's expression darkened, and she suddenly remembered the dreamy images of her the devil and her mother. It pained Rachel deeply to think that her mother would remain imprisoned in Satan's Hell, in his torturous abyss. Would her mother's soul be released from the clutches of the devil? Rachel closed her eyes and sighed deeply. It was perhaps the deepest she breathed in her entire life.

Eve had the fruit in her hand and bit deeply into it. Then she went to Adam and beckoned him to do the same. Rachel smiled, and hopefulness filled her being. But would the future return to the reality she

knew or would it be something different again? Rachel just wanted her own reality back. She desperately wanted to see Marty, despite the murder she would have to face.

There was only one way to tell if thing would return to the way they had been. Rachel rustled through the bushes, and pulled the device out of her pocket. She pressed the button, and felt the current rush through her body once again.

She materialized in the tomb chamber amidst flashes of white and blue arcs. Rachel took a few moments to collect herself and ward off the dizziness (she was getting quite used to this), and then she bolted out the door and down the steps. She ran anxiously, closing her eyes, hoping that when she passed into the world, there would be a place for her. She did not want to be greeted by stark trees and dark demons, which would surely be accompanied by utter disappointment and total failure.

Rachel flicked her eyes open and before her stood hundreds of gravestones spread out amongst that darkened wood. She sank down to the ground in ecstasy.

“This is real, this is what it’s supposed to be!” Rachel exclaimed, overjoyed by even the morbid gray stones. Tears of joy streamed down her previously tear-strewn face. She grabbed the black mushy earth and pressed it to her face.

She zealously rose from the ground and ran towards the metal fence. She hugged its hardness into her face like cozy warm flesh. She quickly scaled the fence, not even visiting her parents’ graves. So enticing was the modern world that she ran through the streets like a child who had never seen the light of day. There was a light rain coming down from tiny gray clouds. Rachel spun around a hundred times. She whirled and giggled. The world was alive for her to choose. She had done it! Humanity had returned. Even the bloody history she knew had returned.

After she had exhausted her dance through the streets, she returned to the graveyard and went to her parents’ graves. What she saw astonished her. There were no gravestones at all; only the painting of herself rested on a pedestal where the gravestones once stood. Rachel creased her brow in confusion and rotated around the pedestal with anxious delight. Surely, the painting couldn’t have lasted all these ages, all these millennia. A hand touched Rachel’s shoulder. Jumping around, almost fiercely, Rachel turned to see her mother’s golden hair.

“MOM!” Rachel exclaimed.

“You make me so proud, Rachel,” her mother said. “You have learned the lessons of your soul very well. You have done what you know, in your heart, is right. And indeed, my wonderful darling, the freedom of human free will has prevailed.”

“Mom, the devil, he doesn’t— He doesn’t have you, does he?” Rachel said, exasperated.

“No, no, of course not, darling,” her mother laughed. “The devil really never had me. Remember how deep his powers of deceit run.”

“If only you knew!” Rachel said, smiling, overjoyed. Rachel questioned the validity of the dreams she had about her mother and the devil. Were they real? At this point, Rachel was too overwhelmed with ecstasy to care.

“I am glad you chose to let humanity take their own course, Rachel. With it, we are what we are today! We are a great race that pushes forward with our passions. We are a people who constantly outdo ourselves. It is our free will, our ability to choose, that keeps us whole. I can see all of this now.”

Rachel embraced her mother. She hugged her corporeal form and littered her cheek with kisses.

“You’re real, you’re not a ghost, you’re here,” Rachel said.

It was her mother’s wisdom and constant encouragement that had given her strength on this strenuous journey. After holding her mother in inexplicable joy for some time, Rachel released her and stepped back. Someone else was there too: her father.

“Rachel,” he said plainly and simply in his deep voice. Rachel gazed up into the same blue eyes that she saw in Domino Belliano. How much her father’s eyes were like Belliano’s.

“Dad,” she said, holding his hands with tenderness. But the eyes, those eyes were so familiar. Rachel could not think of anything else. “Dad, do you know a man named Domino Belliano? Or did you know him?”

“I never knew him, but there was once a man named Domino Belliano who lived long long ago. He was a great man, and maybe one day you’ll learn about him. He’s been dead for some time though, darling. Perhaps the strange man you met in the grave yard was related to him,” he said calmly, with the same caring confidence she remembered. Rachel giggled and looked at her father with awe.

“I’m so glad you’re here, with me,” she said.

“I am too, Rachel. We know what you went through, Rachel. We watched from another place,” her father said gently.

“I see,” Rachel said, confused slightly, but stunned by the beauty of her fathers gentle smiles.

“But Rachel, honey,” her mother said with a sad tone in her voice. “We must go now. This was one of your gifts, as well as ours, for being so selfless and steadfast on your quest. Thank you for giving all of us life, my darling. You are a gem, my wonderful shadow-girl!”

Her father winked, and before Rachel knew it, her parents were slowly fading away. Their images were flying apart like a fraying woven tapestry. Eventually they spun apart and tore down their corporeal barriers completely. Rachel noticed the hints of angels and their wings floating above her parents. Within moments, they were gone. Rachel stood saddened yet utterly overcome with joy. Such a mix of emotion! She turned around, and the gravestones were back in place. The painting rested on its pedestal in between them. If ever an inanimate object could be proud, this painting was.

Her mother’s voice echoed, “You are a gem, remember it always, my darling shadow-girl!” Rachel smiled and laughed to herself. She was the fairy of the woods, the fairy who magically transcended time and space like some mystical angel. She quite easily scaled the fence once again and skipped through the street back to her house. But first she had to try something out. She looked directly at a car passing in the street and closed her eyes; when she opened them, the car had stopped in its place. In fact, every object around her was possessed by her moment of stillness. She released it instantly, so that she would not to make herself too weak.

‘Just a test’, Rachel thought. ‘But it worked!’

Rachel laughed zestfully, and knew that life would never be the same. Free will had reared its head and roared. Rachel felt empowered. It was more than just her ability to slow time, but with the ability to choose who to love, or who to hate, or who to know. Knowledge of all the wonderful things that the earth had to offer seemed easily attainable to Rachel. She was enamored with simple choices, like going right or left, running a red light, or even simply buying a milkshake at her favorite restaurant. The freedom of choice was the greatest gift Rachel had, and she knew it. With that freedom, her powers and imagination were limitless.

A bird flew by overhead. It was a large eagle with red feathers. It crooned in the wind. Rachel looked upwards at the bird and laughed. The bird swooped down fast to the earth and then tore into the sky, flying freely into the distance. Rachel smiled. She skipped down the road, pulling out a Djarum clove cigarette. She lit the cigarette and confidently consumed it.

Rachel would face whatever challenges came her way. She would face the murder that she had tried to abandon. She would tell her aunt everything and would reaffirm the love of Marty, no matter what the cost. Despite the consequences, Rachel would make sure that she took responsibility for her actions. She had many choices, but only a few were the ones that would make her life unique and special and right for her.

Rachel would no longer run away. She would take her life by the reigns with confidence and honor. Rachel slowly made her way home, not thinking about the bloodstained body of Cameron that might or might not be there. She thought of what she would say to her aunt and uncle, who would most likely be frightened and shocked beyond their wits capacity. She thought of what she would say to the authorities. She thought of the truth she would preserve. If she could do all these things, Rachel knew she would prevail and that she would be just fine. Her choices were clear, and the freedom to live a willful life were laid ahead on the road before her. All she had to do was go down that road.

The rain intensified and started to come down harder, but Rachel did no care. She walked down the hard black pavement, reveling in her new found confidence, in her new found lust for life.

As Rachel skipped through the wet street, a serpent crawled on its belly around the graveyard. It slithered over and around the painting of the woodland girl. It slithered into Belliano's great tomb. It slithered around the control panels while its eyes glowed a deep alluring blue. A rumbling laugh came forth from the depths of this tiny snake.

It burst into white blinding conflagration. When the flash subsided, a man with blue eyes stood tall. He was eerily dressed in a long black leather jacket that fit tightly to his form. Thick wavy long hair draped over his head. His eyes gleamed brightly with their azure hues, and he looked out into the graveyard. Domino Belliano had returned. He noticed that some other sad girl clad in black was mourning for a departed loved one. The girl stared hopelessly at a gravestone in anguish, and then broke her stare, looking out into the woods, longing for a release from the pain of her dull life with death present at every

corner. The girl was drawn to the woods, to the mists of the graveyard. In between the dark cavernous trees, the girl moped around aimlessly, without purpose, without direction. Just the type he loved.

“Well, if at first you don’t succeed, then try try again!” the man said with a deafening inhuman laugh.

**THE END**