

Rachel

by
David A. Rollins

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A Brief Preview

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A bright autumn moon shone its golden light through a thin wisp of clouds overlooking the small harbor town of Shady Grove. It was a warm night for late September, with a gentle breeze blowing inland off of the Chesapeake Bay. Out at the harbor, a seventeen year old boy named Paul Sneed raced his fire red sports car along a gravelly dirt road, past the tall cabin cruisers and long slender sailboats swaying lightly to and fro on the evening tide. He drove out to a grassy cove at the far edge of the inlet, where the ground suddenly drops off in a perilous plunge over an old roughly hewn seawall, and where the harbor empties out into the bay.

The vibrantly lit Bay Bridge could be seen off in the distance, her regal arms stretching upward and outward from the mainland into the vast infinite darkness, searching the far shore on the other side. Far below, the dark water of the bay lay smooth and flat, like a highly polished mirror, reflecting the glittering diamond like stars above on its surface.

Midnight had come and gone just a short while ago, and its wake there was not another living soul to be seen. Paul stopped the car at a reasonably safe distance from the steep edge of the seawall, shutting off the lights and engine. He then turned to face the lovely young woman sitting next to him, a woman he had just met that morning. Her name was Rachel Damon, an attractive California native, who had only arrived in Shady Grove a few weeks before to attend her grandmother's funeral.

The news of her grandmother's death came as a shock. Rachel had not seen her in many years, mostly due to the great distance between them and the costly expense of traveling, though they did try to keep in touch. However, communications were rare, and usually limited to short letters, hastily written post cards, or an occasional long-distance phone call, though not nearly as often as either of them would have preferred.

Tragically, their last visit occurred when Rachel was fourteen, seven years earlier, when after years of suffering from debilitating depression, her father committed suicide. Her grandmother flew out to San Francisco to attend the funeral. The unexpected news of her grandmother's demise left Rachel heartbroken. It was but another tragedy in a long line of tragedies that she had already endured in her short life. As she boarded the

plane to Maryland, she found it ironic that the last time she saw her grandmother was at a funeral. And so it would be again.

Rachel was also there to settle her grandmother's estate, as she was her only living relative. Shortly after receiving the news that her grandmother died, she received a certified letter from a lawyer - the executor of her grandmother's estate - informing her that she had been named in her grandmother's Will. The document gave a date and time for when the Will would be settled, and made it clear that it was imperative she attend the proceedings. Enclosed was a one-way airline ticket.

Rachel had no expectations of what might be in store for her when she arrived in Shady Grove. She was grateful that her grandmother thought to provide for her. Still, she didn't expect much. At best, she hoped to inherit a few dollars, or perhaps some treasured family heirlooms. After the proceedings, she would pay her respects, collect her bounty, and then make a hasty retreat back to California. That would have suited her just fine.

But in a surprising twist of fate, Rachel was thrilled to learn that her grandmother had been quite well off financially, and she had inherited all of her worldly possessions, including a cozy little bay front cottage. Seeing that her luck might finally be changing for the better, Rachel decided to remain in the quiet little bayside town of Shady Grove. It was at that very point in her life when she met Paul Sneed.

Paul was a strikingly handsome teenager. He introduced himself to Rachel that morning after seeing her in the yard. His house sat next to hers in a secluded clearing at the end of a long winding dirt road on a tiny peninsula at the edge of the bay.

Paul's had grown there, and he remembered when Rachel's grandparents moved in. Her grandfather was extremely ill at the time and died a few months later. After that, her grandmother lived there alone and kept mostly to herself. Paul would see her outside, coming and going, or painting her canvases down by the water's edge, though except for an occasional hello in passing he rarely ever spoke to the old woman or made any attempt to get to know her. She seemed quite content with that arrangement.

It wasn't that Paul was unfriendly - quite the contrary as a matter of fact - he was just timid and shy by nature. However, Rachel certainly caught his attention when she moved in to the house.

Nevertheless, Rachel had already been there several days before he ever worked up the courage to say hello. When he discovered that Rachel was from out of town, he offered to give her the “grand tour” of Shady Grove.

Even though he was a few years younger than Rachel, she still accepted his invitation. Paul was ecstatic, to say the least. They spent the entire afternoon casually sight seeing, allowing Rachel an opportunity to familiarize herself with the area.

Though Rachel appreciated his thoughtfulness, in her eyes he was still no more than a boy. Still, she obligingly feigned interest while he drove her around the town, showing her the supermarket, the bank, the post office, and various other nondescript landmarks he thought a new person to the community would need to know. In the end, none of this really mattered to Paul or Rachel. He only wanted to spend time with her, and she was happy just to have someone to talk to.

Paul didn't have much experience with women, and he certainly had never been with anyone as intriguing and worldly as Rachel Damon. His insecurities made him shy away from close contact with most people. Nevertheless, Paul was growing a little more confident as the day went on, and he boldly began flirting with his pretty companion as they drove randomly through the quiet shaded streets.

They stopped for lunch at the local drive-in ice cream parlor, sitting in his car in the parking lot eating foot-long chilidogs and drinking thick vanilla shakes. Paul would innocently touch Rachel's arm or hand while they talked. He even once let his hand brush against her leg while pretending to need a napkin from the glove box.

Rachel had no interest in Paul romantically. She was just happy to be out on such a beautiful day. Her newfound friend kept her steadily amused as he awkwardly fumbled his attempts to appear older and more mature in his effort to impress her. Of course Rachel was flattered by his innocent flirtations. He was harmless after all, and compared to most of the men she had known, he had been a perfect gentleman. All the same, she couldn't help thinking that this small town mentality would take some getting used to.

The setting sun painted the evening sky in long magnificent strokes of orange, red, yellow, and purple as Paul and Rachel finally arrived back home. They walked down to the small pier between their two houses, watching as the sun dropped below the horizon, taking its heavenly palette of colors with it.

Rachel leaned up against the wood railing, silently enjoying the view. Paul seemed oblivious to the magnificent spectacle before them. He concentrated his attention on Rachel instead, moving as close as he could get to her, while trying not to appear too obvious at the same time.

As the last remnants of color gradually faded, Rachel thanked him for a wonderful day, but Paul was not quite ready to give up his captivating guest so soon. Thinking quickly on his feet, he invited her to join him for dinner at his house. Rachel accepted his offer, on the one condition that he let her cook for him instead. They both agreed to meet back at her house in half an hour. With their plan set, Rachel contentedly strolled off across the lawn. Paul was smitten. He remained on the pier, longingly watching her as she walked away. In his adolescent mind, he was already hoping that she liked him as much as he liked her.

Rachel's bay front house was small but cozy. Like Paul's house, it sat out on a tiny peninsula, which offered up a picturesque view of the bay. The back and front porches, which stretched the entire width of the house, were screened in, offering at least a little privacy.

All of the furnishings inside belonged to her grandmother, items that had been collected over a lifetime, pieces that her father would probably recognize from when he was a child if he were there to see them. In addition, the walls were hung with several of her grandmother's framed oil paintings of brightly colored sailboats and breathtaking views of the bay from the shore.

On the mantle above the fireplace sat held a variety of framed photographs, pictures of Rachel's parents and grandparents from when they were very young, and a few others of people who Rachel didn't know. In the middle of the mantle sat an antique clock with a large crystal face on the front that opened with a key. Rachel vaguely remembered hearing it chime when she was very young, but couldn't seem to remember when or where that was. It all seemed very warm and familiar, giving her a pleasing sense of belonging.

After entering the house, Rachel immediately went to the kitchen to put on a pot of water to boil for pasta before heading upstairs to shower. The bedroom was definitely her favorite room of the house. A narrow spiral wrought iron staircase led up to the

wide-open loft above, which looked precariously down over the living room from a wood railing. Two large bay windows and an overhead skylight provided the open loft with an abundance of sunlight during the day. But with night falling, the loft sat dark, so Rachel switched on a small tiffany lamp sitting on the nightstand beside the bed.

The evening had remained comfortably warm, so Rachel laid out a thin summer dress to wear for dinner and began to get undressed, wrapping a thick fluffy towel around her as she headed off for the shower. Just then, a salty whiff of bay water drifted in on the breeze. She paused for just a moment to gaze out of the open window.

From her vantage point, she could clearly see Paul's house across the yard. The house was dark except for a light shining in the living room window and another light out on the front porch. Rachel wondered what he was doing over there, then she quickly scampered off to the shower, giggling out loud and making a mental note to remind herself that she really needed to buy some curtains.

Next door, Paul felt his way blindly across his darkened bedroom, his eyes not yet adjusted to the darkness. The moon had not yet risen on the horizon and the ebony sky draped the two houses like a shroud. Paul made his way over to the open window, standing motionless in the silence.

The thin curtains brushed against him as they blew into the room, as if they were consciously trying to push him away, knowing all too well what his intentions were. Paul ignored their heeding and determinedly pushed them aside, peering out across the small expanse of yard over at the tiny cottage, directly into Rachel Damon's bedroom window.

After showering, Rachel returned to the bedroom to get dressed, letting her towel fall to the floor. She quickly slipped into the light ankle length dress, wearing nothing underneath but her panties.

Time was slipping away as she hurriedly dried her long hair while heading barefoot back down the spiral staircase to continue cooking dinner, unaware that next door, Paul had been standing quietly in his darkened bedroom watching her the whole time, covertly enjoying his voyeuristic view of her large bay windows.

The pot of water on the stove was boiling furiously. Rachel tossed in a handful of thin pasta while preparing a delicious homemade sauce to go with it, smiling widely with satisfaction after sampling it with a large wooden spoon.

She switched on the transistor radio sitting on the counter and began dancing around the kitchen as she threw together a small garden salad and sliced some French bread for their dinner. She had just finished setting the table when she heard the sound of Paul's voice calling from out on the porch. She walked over to open the screen door for him and cordially invited him inside.

Paul entered, smiling bashfully, and presented Rachel with a rather expensive bottle of wine - belonging to his parents - and a single red rose. She was a little surprised, but she smiled and thanked him anyway for the unexpected offerings, even though she thought that it was a bit much considering this was just supposed to be a friendly dinner. She wondered if it was just a nice gesture, or maybe another of his boyish attempts at being romantic. She found him cute in a "little brother" sort of way, but in the end, it was merely company to her and she was happy to have it.

Either way, it was still very nice of him to make the effort, so without giving it much thought, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. As they walked back to the kitchen though, she couldn't help to notice that Paul still had on the same clothes he had been wearing all day. He could have at least showered and freshened up a little bit before dinner, she thought to herself. Still, she dismissively shrugged it off and chalked it up to his age.

Dinner went smoothly. Paul talked about his experiences growing up in a small country town and how he had come to inherit the house. He was born the only child in a very affluent household. His father was a big bank executive, and his mother was the supportive-hostess-housewife who believed her sole purpose in life was to serve him. Demonstrations of affection in his family were few and far between. He was raised under their very strict rules and guidelines and was thoroughly expected to perform to their excessively high standards of excellence. Paul had spent his entire life trying to please them, even at the expense of his own happiness at times, and yet his father still had little time to spare for him, and his dogmatic mother controlled his every move.

It had been a very sheltered life. Consequently, Paul had always been a bit of a loner, keeping mostly to himself and having few friends. He grew to be extremely moody, often suffering from long bouts of depression. He had a difficult time expressing emotions, usually keeping them pent up inside until the frustration gave way to erratic

bursts of uncontrolled anger. Of course, fearing rejection, he didn't feel comfortable sharing the sordid details of the darker side of his personality with his present dinner companion.

Paul did have a girlfriend for a brief time, although his mother rigidly disapproved of the poor girl, and she made no qualms about letting her know. When the young woman stopped coming around, Paul became even more reclusive. He graduated high school a year early at the top of his class and planned to go to the state university the following fall. At the end of that summer, as they had planned, Paul's parents moved to Florida, leaving him the house, an adequately substantial bank account, and one year to decide what he wanted to do with his future. Ironically, the only thing Paul really wanted was to finally be free of their excessive control.

In turn, Rachel explained that she had never even known her own mother, a frail woman who had died in childbirth when she was born, after which, her heartbroken father tried his best to raise her on his own. His mother lived too far away to be of any real assistance, and he had no other relatives to turn too. The death of his wife devastated him emotionally and he spent the remainder of his days grieving for her in a silent depression that worsened with each passing year. As a result, Rachel was burdened early on in life with the added responsibility of caring for both her father and herself. That pattern of fending for herself was one that would continue for years afterwards.

One dark dreadful night, when Rachel was only fourteen, her father was getting ready for bed. As he always did, he tenderly hugged and kissed her goodnight before retiring. Then, after closing the bedroom door securely behind him, he sat on the edge his bed, took a loaded pistol from the drawer of the nightstand, put the barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger. From that moment on, Rachel had been left to fend for herself in an often-uncaring world that seemed to offer her few if any options.

After her father's funeral, Rachel's grandmother invited her to come and stay at her house back east, but Rachel refused to go. She had lived in San Francisco all of her life and had no intentions of ever leaving. San Francisco was where all her friends were. She didn't know anyone back in Shady Grove. Unfortunately, without any legal guardian, the Child Welfare Board petitioned to have her declared a Ward of the Court. She was promptly placed into a foster care home from which she immediately ran away.

Left to her own devices, and fearing the courts, Rachel lost all interest in school. She began wandering aimlessly around the Bay Area of San Francisco, living carelessly with a wide assortment of other discarded people such as herself in the hippy communes, the women's shelters, or anywhere else that she could find refuge. She quickly became quite adept at taking care of herself. What she learned on the streets more than compensated for her lack of formal education.

Though she had enjoyed living the life of a "free spirit", in the wake of recent events, the thought of owning her own home made her feel as if she had roots again, and a place to settle down. Perhaps this was her chance to start over, to make up for the mistakes she had made along the way. Rachel Damon had just turned twenty-one, and she was already joyously celebrating a new lease on life.

The night passed pleasantly. Paul and Rachel sat at her kitchen table sipping the wine while sharing their life stories with each other. Paul could not keep his eyes off of her. He gazed upon her as one might do studying a magnificent work of art. He was totally infatuated with the life she had led, which was very different from the tight constraints he was raised under.

She smelled nice. There was a slight scent of strawberries in her long blonde hair, which perfectly framed her face and softly caressed her shoulders. Paul would coyly catch a glimpse of her breasts whenever she bent over far enough that he could see them, or spy the slight outline of her panties through the thin material of her dress.

He began imagining the two of them making love beside her fireplace. He could almost feel her shapely body writhing in pleasure under his. As he fantasized about her, the sound of Rachel's voice asking him to help her in the kitchen suddenly interrupted his thoughts, and his face flushed with embarrassment on the off chance that she might be aware of what he had been thinking.

They had just finished cleaning up the dinner dishes when the clock out on the mantle struck midnight. Rachel tiredly suggested that they call it an evening and walked Paul to the door. Outside, the bay water was shimmering under the full moon. Off in the distance, they could see the lights from the cars crossing over the Bay Bridge. The magnificent view reminded her of San Francisco and she commented on what a beautiful sight it was.

Paul's face lit up. He told Rachel she would be able to view the bridge better from the inlet at the edge of the harbor and suggested that they take a quick drive down there. Noting the time, Rachel politely declined his kind invitation, but Paul assured her that it was not far and that they would come right back. After several minutes of refusals and rebuttals, Rachel finally gave in. They took two glasses and what was left of the wine, and headed out in Paul's fire red sport car.

The two of them sat relaxed in his car at the edge of the inlet, gazing out into the moon lit night. Except for the unrelenting sound of the crickets chirping and the waves splashing against the rocks below the nearby seawall, it was blissfully quiet. Paul poured Rachel a glass of wine. She lowered the car seat back, stretching her long legs as she put her bare feet up on the dashboard, sipping her wine while trying to count the millions of stars up in the night sky.

Paul pointed out a brightly shining star high on the horizon. He asked her if she knew what it was. With her curiosity piqued, she replied that she didn't have a clue. He explained to her that it was Venus, Goddess of Love, and she was shining tonight just for them. Rachel smiled, rolling her eyes, wondering how she didn't see that line coming a mile away and looked at him askance. Paul, seeing that Rachel was on to him, laughingly admitted that he had made the whole thing up.

Rachel still had her feet resting up on the dashboard. She shifted in her seat trying to get comfortable. As she did, her thin summer dress slowly began to slip up her legs. When she turned to say something to Paul, she was not surprised to find him ogling. Still, it made her feel uncomfortable, so she lowered her legs and suggested they should get out of the car. They got out and sat on the hood instead, dangling their feet and sipping on the wine. Rachel proposed that they should make a toast in honor of the beautiful bay. They raised their wine glasses up in a grand salute, clinking them together. As the tinkling sound of the crystal rang out crisply in the night, they both laughed out loud at their silliness.

Paul rarely drank alcohol and he was starting to feel its affects. As his inhibitions fell away, he suddenly leaned over and kissed Rachel full on the mouth. Startled at first, she continued laughing, deciding it best to let the moment pass, and mentioned to him that perhaps they should be heading back. He ignored her suggestion, foolishly trying to

persuade her to relax. He put his hand on her hip and awkwardly tried kissing her again. She nonchalantly removed his hand and quickly slid off of the hood of the car, again nervously suggesting that they head back. The last thing she needed at that moment was to be trapped out in the middle of nowhere with an immature, intoxicated, oversexed boy. Still, she felt certain that she could handle him and diffuse the situation before it got out of hand.

Paul apologized after seeing that that Rachel seemed unhappy with his amorous advances. He agreed to take her home, though Rachel could tell that he wasn't happy about it. As he walked around to open the car door for her, she stepped back, staring at him suspiciously with her arms folded tightly across her chest. There was an obvious look of disappointment and anger in Paul's eyes that made her feel wary. She had seen that look from men that she had rejected before. Slowly but hesitantly she moved toward him. Then, as she went to get in, he grabbed her, forcibly shoving her against the hood of the car. His hands were all over her. Rachel angrily tried to push him off, but he had her pinned tight, totally oblivious to her objections.

The alcohol had loosed all of the pent up emotion that had been building inside of him all day. But when Paul tried to kiss her again, Rachel slapped him hard across the face. Crushed by her unexpectedly harsh response, he stood there stunned, the anger welling up inside of him. Then, when Rachel tried to move away, Paul hit her across the jaw with the back of his hand.

Dazed for a moment by the powerful blow, her mind slowly came back into focus. She felt his hand sliding up under her dress, ripping at her panties. Frightened and helpless she struggles to break free. Paul pulled her dress up over her hips. He was drunk and out of control. She screamed and pleaded at him to stop, but Paul wasn't hearing her. He irately drew back his fist once more, hitting her hard, causing her to black out.

Rachel had no idea how long she had been unconscious. When she finally came to, she was laying on the ground, her dress bunched up around her waist. She was hurt and shivering, her face dirty and swollen, and there was a taste of blood in her mouth. The inside of her legs where scratched where Paul had forcibly pulled them apart when he

raped her. She clumsily sat up and slowly gathered herself together as she nervously looked around to see where he was.

She found him sitting on the edge of the seawall, crying and rocking back and forth while cradling himself in his own arms. Rachel's legs trembled beneath her as she carefully tried to pick herself up off of the ground. Naturally, her first instinct was to leave, and she wasn't really sure why she didn't do just that. Instead, she walked over to where Paul was sitting, making sure to stand back from him a few feet, just in case.

She called his name. He didn't answer. She tried to think of something to say, but what can you say to someone who has just beaten and raped you? Frustrated and scared, she stood in the unsettling silence looking impatiently around, wondering what in the world she was doing out there and how she ever allowed herself to end up in this mess.

Paul looked so pathetic sitting there crying like a baby, she thought to herself, especially after what he had just done to her. But Rachel had known a lot of pathetic people in her short life, and incredibly, she started to feel a strange sense of pity for him. She called his name again, imploring him to please take her home and forget any of this ever happened, though he didn't seem to hear. Then, without warning, Paul jumped to his feet. Rachel backed away from him as he menacingly approached her, shouting obscenities and accusing her of being a liar and a tease. Fearing that he might hit her again, she instinctively threw her hands up in front of her face.

Paul was infuriated. He continued with his ranting and raving about how she had led him on all day, deceitfully making him believe that she liked him more than a friend. In an effort to calm him down, Rachel slowly lowered her hands and quietly whispered that all she wanted to do was go home. He quit yelling, but he was still glaring at her, doubtful that she could be trusted. Then he nervously demanded to know if she intended to go to the police?

Rachel had had enough, her fear now turned to anger. Whatever sympathy she felt for him a moment before quickly dissipated. She was exhausted. She had been physically and emotionally molested by this coldhearted maniac, and the only thing he was concerned with was whether or not she was going to go to the police. The time had come to put an end to it. Finally, feeling fed up and disgusted with this boyish excuse for a man, Rachel turned and started to walk away.

She had only taken a few steps without looking back and didn't hear him coming up from behind. He grabbed her tightly by the arms, dragging her back to the edge of the seawall. Terrified, she screamed as she tried to kick and claw at him, begging and pleading for him to let her go. Finally, she managed to break free. They stood on the edge of the seawall facing off with each other. Rachel's anger showed in her eyes, but Paul just stood there with a look of confused desperation on his face.

The silence between them was deafening. Rachel attempted to steady her nerves, trying not to lose her head while attempting to regain her composure. If she could have looked inside Paul's mind at that moment, she would surely have fled for her life, because all of the years of emotional turmoil seemed to be seething its way to the surface, about to erupt in an unexpected violent volcanic rage. Just as Rachel thought it was all over, she saw Paul clench his fists. Then he raised his head back and let out a chilling scream as he lunged at her, pushing her over the edge of the seawall.

Her scream echoed through the silence of the night as she fell, landing against the rocks some fifteen feet below. Her head struck hard against the cold stone, killing her instantly. Paul looked down at her, and slowly the reality of what he had done came crashing down around him. He stood there in shock, watching horrified as her body slipped off the rocks into the dark water and disappeared beneath the waves, and suddenly he was alone with his guilt.

It had all happened so fast. Paul looked around, nervously wondering if anyone had seen them. He knew he had to get out of there. He tried hard not to panic as he ran back to the car, quickly gathering up the wine bottle and the glasses. Rachel's torn panties were lying in the grass, so he picked them up too and tossed everything onto the front seat before driving off. His mind was racing. He was sure that no one had seen them together, and for all that mattered, no one even knew who Rachel was, since she had only recently arrived in town. It would be days before anyone even missed her, if ever. All he had to do was to pretend that they had never met. Who would ever know?

Luckily it was late. There was never anyone on the road at that time of night in quiet little Shady Grove. Paul headed for home, making one stop along the way to dispose of the incriminating evidence --- the bottle of wine, the glasses, and the panties --- dumping them in the large trash bin in the back lot behind the darkened ice cream parlor. He felt

certain he had not been detected as he turned onto the narrow winding dirt road that led back to his house.

Paul rushed inside, turning out all the lights, and went straight to bed. As he laid in the dark - alone, afraid and worried - agonizing over what he had done, the light on in Rachel Damon's bedroom across the yard shown dimly through his window. Trying desperately to shut out the terrible deed from his mind, he closed his eyes and buried his face in his pillow, but it would be a long time before he finally fell asleep.

Chapter One: Thirty Years Later

The late morning sun shot bright bolts of light down through the thick canopy of trees that lined the narrow winding dirt road leading back to Paul Sneed's house. He was anxious to be home again. It had been nearly thirty years since he last drove down that path, having lived all that time in Florida. He seemed amazed at how very little had changed out on the peninsula.

On the other hand, as Paul drove in through town that Thursday morning, he noticed how Shady Grove itself had changed considerably while he was gone. Hardly anything remained that was still familiar. So many more people were living there now. Private condominiums and apartment complexes had gone up everywhere. Sprawling shopping centers and fast food joints had replaced most of the little "ma and pa" stores and restaurants. It felt like an entirely new town. Progress isn't always a good thing, he thought to himself.

The years he spent in Florida, though productive, were unfulfilling. Never a day passed by when he didn't think of his beautiful home on the bay, but it was impossible for him to come back until he was able to deal emotionally with the awful secret that lay buried deep in his distant past. Not until his father died did Paul seriously began to consider moving north again. Even then, he still hesitated a few more years, perhaps if for no other reason than to make certain in his mind that enough time had passed for the people of Shady Grove to have finally forgotten about him and his shadowy past.

As he entered the clearing, an eerie feeling came over him, as if he had just driven back through time. At least out on the peninsula, everything looked exactly as Paul remembered it to be. He hesitated for a moment before getting out of the car while his eyes were unavoidably drawn to the little cottage across from his. It didn't look all that different. Another family lived there now, although at the moment he didn't see anyone, which was just as well. Paul didn't want to be bothered with introductions.

He grabbed a small gym bag from the seat next to him containing some of his personal items, leaving several small boxes in the back seat and a couple of suitcases in the trunk to be dealt with later. Then, after taking a calming breath, he took the keys out of the ignition and exited the car. At last, he was home.

As Paul walked through the gate towards the house he felt a great sense of relief that he never decided to sell the place. The care and upkeep had been entrusted over the years to Barbara Fryer, a local realtor and long time friend of his family, who was charged with the task of renting the house for him. Several months earlier, Paul called Barbara to let her know that he was planning on moving back permanently, as soon as the current tenants lease had expired. Now he was finally home. He eagerly turned the key in the door and stepped inside.

The moving company had already delivered his furniture a few days prior to his return, coordinated with the help of Barbara Fryer, but the house had been vacant for nearly a month now, ever since the last tenant moved out, and it was rather stuffy inside. He set his bag down in one of the plush chairs in the living room and went about opening the large windows to let in some fresh air. Almost immediately, a salty scented breeze blowing in off of the bay replaced the musty odor of a house that had been closed up too long. He returned back to his car, retrieving the two suitcases from the trunk, carrying them back inside, up the narrow stairway to the bedroom, where he placed it squarely in the middle of the bed.

It felt even stuffier upstairs, so before unpacking, he opened the windows on either side of the room. An unnerving feeling came over him after looking across the yard at the view of the house next door. It almost felt as if he had never left. Paul shut his eyes tightly as he stood there agonizing over a sudden flood of forgotten memories resurfacing in his mind. He turned away, trying hard to block them out, and nervously returned to the open suitcase to finish unpacking, but it was useless. He stopped what he was doing and sat down on the edge of the mattress, lost in his thoughts.

In the calm quiet of the room, Paul's mind was suddenly transported back to that fateful night. The breeze coming in through the window blew the thin curtains out into the room, just as it had done on that warm still night so long ago. He tried to think of something else, but he knew if he were going to be able to live there again, he would eventually have to face the horrid tormenting memories that he had repressed for so long. Standing up again, Paul slowly made his way back to the open window.

He let his mind be distracted momentarily by the sound of the soft wind rustling through the trees outside and the breathtaking view of the bay. Gradually, his gaze

returned to the house next door. He closed his eyes in an effort to block out the flashbulb like images going off in his mind of the last time he had stood there . . . watching. He hesitantly opened his eyes, focusing in on the one place that he had dreaded seeing ever since he left Florida. There, across the yard, Paul could see what used to be the bedroom window of Rachel Damon.

A Short Time Later

Barbara Fryer loved her job. In fact, Barbara Fryer loved her life. A very happy and caring person, she was well known around Shady Grove both for her infectious laugh and pleasant demeanor. Barbara always had a good word to say about everyone she met. After graduating high school, she took a job with a local real estate company, the same company that sold the little cottage on the bay to Rachel's grandparents. In fact, Barbara had been instrumental in closing the deal for them.

Now an independent realtor, she was both successful and content with her life. Shady Grove had always been her home and she knew Paul and his family well. When Paul moved away, his house sat vacant for several years, till one day, Barbara received a call from him asking her if she would act as a rental agent. Happy to take on the responsibility, she was given total control over its upkeep, and had been leasing it out for well over twenty-five years now, for a very handsome commission of course.

Barbara turned her Lincoln onto the long dirt road leading back to Paul's house, pulling up next to his car as she entered the clearing. She grabbed her cell phone and thick leather bound appointment book and headed towards the front gate. Upon arriving there, she noticed a young blonde haired woman in a long dress standing on the porch, but before she could call out to her, the woman disappeared around the side of the house. As Barbara walked up on the porch, she glanced over to where she had seen the young woman, wondering who it might have been.

Paul had not mentioned that he was bringing anyone with him, and as far as Barbara knew, he had no children. Stranger still, there appeared to be wet footprints on the porch, leading away from the door and around the side of the house, as if someone had just walked away with wet bare feet. Barbara knocked again. While she waited for Paul to

answer the door, she curiously walked over to the edge of the house and looked around the corner.

There was no one there.

Suddenly, Barbara was startled by a sound coming from behind her, making her gasp! Putting her hand to her heart she spun around, coming face to face with Paul. She laughed nervously and smacked him playfully on the arm, relieved that it was only he standing there.

“You nearly scared me to death!” she scolded him.

Paul snickered as he hugged Barbara affectionately. “How good it is to see you again, Barbara.”

“It’s good to see you too,” she adoringly replied.

Barbara followed him inside, having already put the mysterious woman she had just seen moments ago out of her mind. Paul offered her something to drink, but she wasn’t about to let him wait on her. She told him to sit down and relax while she went to put a kettle of water on the boil for tea.

Paul had always liked Barbara, even when he was a kid. She was a good friend of his parents. She even babysat Paul when he was very young. Barbara had always treated him with kindness and respect, accepting him for who and what he was without reservation or expectation. Even when Rachel Damon’s body was found floating in the harbor, and the police came to Paul’s house asking him questions, the whole community immediately decided that he must be guilty of the crime. Although it was never proven that he ever had anything to do with it, it was Barbara who stood by him, staunchly proclaiming his innocence, and vehemently opposing anyone who foolishly attempted to convince her otherwise.

“So Paul, how does it feel to be back?” she asked, while busying herself with cups and saucers.

“It been a very long time Barbara, hasn’t it?” he replied. “ I can’t get over how much everything has changed.”

Barbara chuckled. “Yes, that’s true, Shady Grove has certainly grown up. But there’s still a lot of the old town left if you go looking for it.”

“That’s good to hear,” he wistfully replied.

Barbara looked at him sympathetically. “You know, I was glad when you told me that you were coming back here to stay, although I must admit, I’m really going to miss taking care of this old place. It truly has been a labor of love. It’s the nicest house in town.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better Barbara, you’re always welcome in my house. Anyway, you’re not off the payroll yet. I’m depending on you to help me take care of this place. You’ve done a wonderful job for me over the years.”

“You can depend on me to help anyway I can,” she replied with a smile.

The kettle on the stove began to whistle. Barbara poured the steaming water into the waiting cups, placed them on a tray with some cream and sugar, and joined Paul at the dining room table. They sat together drinking tea and fondly reminiscing about the old days - the good times they shared, and all the people they had known growing up. However, Barbara tactfully avoided any mention of Rachel Damon and casually inquired about his mother instead.

Paul sadly explained that his mother had not been herself ever since his father passed away a little over four years ago. Though she was not physically ill, she had lived her entire adult life in diligent servitude to her husband’s every want and need, with little thought to her own. Now that he was gone, she had no idea what to do with herself. So when Paul decided to leave Florida, he convinced her to come back with him. In fact, she was due to arrive the next day. Paul had already arranged to pick her up at the airport.

“She doesn’t drive,” Paul explained. “But she also didn’t want to make that long drive with me, and I didn’t want to have to ship my car up here, so I drove up and she’s flying in tomorrow.”

“How can someone reach her age and never learn to drive?” Barbara incredulously asked as she took the empty cups and saucers back to the sink.

That’s my mother,” Paul cynically replied. “You know what she’s like.”

Barbara just chuckled. “I’ll have to make a point of stopping in to see her.” She then ripped a sheet of paper from her notebook and handed it to him, along with her key to the house. “Here’s my card with my work and home number, so don’t hesitate to call if you need anything. The refrigerator and cabinets are well stocked and I think you’ll find everything is in order.”

She gathered up her phone and notebook as Paul walked her to the door.

“Oh, and you also have some new neighbors,” she casually mentioned as they walked along. “Have you met them yet?”

Paul silently shook his head no

“Thomas and Jenni McDonald,” she informed him. “You’ll like them a lot. They’re a very nice couple with a lovely little girl named Jean.”

“I’m sure they are,” Paul dismissively replied.

Barbara knew that Paul was feeling uneasy about being back. He was still a little apprehensive about what some people might think if they found out he had returned.

“Don’t let the past come back to haunt you Paul, that was a long time ago,” she reassured him.

She took him by the arm. He managed to force a smile as they walked out on the front porch. Being back out on the porch again reminded Barbara about the curious young woman in the long dress who she saw standing out there when she drove up.

“By the way Paul, who’s your pretty friend?” she asked with a grin.

“What friend?” he inquired.

“That pretty blonde woman I saw on the porch when I got here.”

Paul looked mystified. “There was someone on my porch?”

“Yes, I thought perhaps it was someone you knew. She walked around back as I drove up today.”

Paul looked confusedly toward the side of the house. “I don’t have any idea who it could be. Do you think it was the woman next door, what did you say her name was?”

“Jenni? No, I don’t think so. I would have recognized Jenni, I’m sure. This was someone I’ve never seen before.”

“I haven’t a clue Barbara,” Paul replied, dumfounded.

Barbara grinned and poked him in the rib. “She was a real dish! Perhaps she’ll come back later and introduce herself.”

Paul seemed far from interested.

Anyway, whoever she was, she must have just come from a swim, because she left wet foot prints on the porch.”

“It’s a mystery to me,” Paul confessed.

Barbara hugged and kissed him before walking off to her car. “Don’t forget, call if you need anything.”

“Thank you again for all your help, Barbara,” Paul gratefully said.

“It was my pleasure,” she told him. She waved her hand in the air without looking back and yelled goodbye. “I’ll send you my bill!”

Paul stood on the porch watching Barbara driving away, wondering who on earth she could have been talking about. The idea that someone he didn’t know had been lurking around. Didn’t sit well with him. In fact, it made him feel strange, as if he were being watched. He walked over to the edge of the porch and looked curiously around the side of the house. Suddenly, he heard a voice from behind him.

“Hello neighbor!”

The sound of Jenni McDonald’s voice made Paul jump. He turned around to see a very attractive woman standing on the other side of the wood rail fence that separated their two properties.

“I saw you pull up this morning,” Jenni said. “I thought I’d come over and introduce myself. I’m Jenni McDonald.”

Paul walked over and reached out to shake her hand. “Paul Sneed,” he cordially replied. “Glad to make your acquaintance.”

Paul had not expected such a pretty neighbor. Jenni McDonald was tall, attractively built, with short shaggy blonde hair and the bluest eyes he had ever seen. She looked to be in her late thirties or early forties. She was dressed in a light yellow t-shirt, making it obvious that she had no bra on, and tight faded jeans.

“Glad to meet you too Paul Sneed,” she affably responded.

“Have you lived here long?” Paul inquired.

“Oh, a few months now I guess. We wanted to get out of the city and away from the rat race. You know how it is. We found this place and I absolutely love it here.”

From the moment Jenni arrived, Paul forgot about his other mysterious visitor. He stood at the fence listening, enthralled and entranced by his gorgeous new neighbor.

Jenni McDonald grew up in a nice quiet middle class suburb of Baltimore. She married her childhood sweetheart shortly after graduation, then spent the next few years working odd jobs here and there helping to put her husband through college. When

Thomas graduated, he took a teaching position at the State University. Jenni quit working to have a child. She was quite content with her role as housewife and mother. She and Thomas originally came to Shady Grove to visit a friend of theirs. Their friend had since moved away, but Jenni had already fallen in love with Shady Grove. From that moment on, her main focus was to leave the city and settle down in the quiet little harbor town.

As Jenni rambled on about her life, Paul began to think of how she was indicative of the upper thirty something crowd who were now approaching their forties, immersed in their careers and family, and were moving from the city out to the country looking for an easier existence. The locals of Shady Grove referred to them as “outlanders”. Unfortunately, there were more and more of them moving in every year. In a strange way though, Paul thought that he and Jenni were probably searching for the same things, for very different reasons of course. Hopefully they would both find peace of mind in Shady Grove.

“Well Paul, I better get back and check on Jean.”

“Jean?”

“Yes, Jean is my daughter. She was napping when I came out, but you know how kids are. If it’s all right, I’ll bring Thomas over to meet you later. He works such long hours and he’s never home, so I’m glad that I have a neighbor to talk to now. It gets kind of lonely around here sometimes.”

“Sure, stop by anytime,” he replied, not really caring if Jenni brought her husband or not.

Jenni smiled contentedly before heading back inside. As she walked away, Paul remembered how he had watched Rachel from that very same spot years ago. Strangely, in a lot of ways, Jenny reminded him of Rachel. Of course Jenni was older than Rachel was at the time, but she seemed to have that same zest for life, that radiant inner light that warmed you inside whenever you were near her, in addition to which, she was every bit as attractive.

Jenni stopped at the front door where she turned to wave at him again, and then disappeared inside her house. As Paul headed back inside, he shook his head and let out a worried sigh, anxiously wondering if he had really made the right choice in deciding to

come back to Shady Grove. In the matter of just a few short hours there had already been some strange, mysterious, disappearing woman hanging around his house, and now here he was, shamelessly flirting with his new neighbor's wife. This is not a real good way to start, he thought. He decided to occupy his mind by finishing unpacking his car and not think about Jenni or Barbara Fryer or mysterious disappearing women. At that moment, the only thing he really wanted was to be left alone.

A Short Distance Away

While Paul and Jenni were making their introductions, Barbara Fryer was dealing with her own odd experiences. She had driven half way down the dirt driveway when the bright morning sun started cutting through the treetops like a thousand laser beams. They were hitting her window like strobe lights and blinding her eyes with their intense brilliance. She squinted as she held her hand up in front of her eyes in an effort to shade them from the blistering rays. Suddenly in the road up ahead, Barbara thought she saw someone through the glare, standing on the path in front of her car. She instinctively slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting them. The car skidded to a halt. Startled, Barbara rubbed her watering eyes trying to focus. When she could finally see clearly again, she looked up to see who it was.

There was no one there.

Barbara looked all around as if she expected to see someone. She could have sworn it was the same woman who had been standing up on Paul's porch when she drove up earlier. A chill suddenly came over her. She stared deep into the surrounding woods, feeling very alone and defenseless. It was too quiet, except for the distant sound of the birds chirping way up in the trees and the wind in the branches overhead.

"Hello," she called out in a near whisper.

The sound of her own voice brought her back to her senses. Thinking she must have been mistaken, Barbara nervously shrugged off her nervousness while laughing at herself for being so ridiculous.

"Barbara Fryer, you nut!" she said out loud. "What in the world has gotten into you? People will think you've lost your fool mind!"

She put the car in gear and continued on to the end of the road, smiling to herself and still wondering about the mysterious woman in the long dress.

“Such a pretty girl too,” she said as she turned onto the main road and headed back to her office.

Several Hours Later

The sun had just begun to set and there was a light fog rolling in off the bay as Thomas McDonald wearily pulled his car into Spicey’s Service Station, which was located about a mile from his home. The evening rush hour traffic on Rt. 97 had been exceptionally heavy. Thomas was tired and stressed from his hour plus drive. He missed the life he had given up with his family and friends back in Baltimore to move out in the country. Thomas made a good living teaching Journalism at the State College and never had any desire to go elsewhere. This move had been Jenni’s idea, and though he had earnestly tried to adjust to the different lifestyle, the long daily commute back and forth to work was quickly wearing thin on his nerves.

The strain was beginning to show in their marriage as well. He was always late getting home, only to be up and out early the next morning, which didn’t leave much time for his wife and child. Weekends were not much better, being spent mostly on preparing lessons for the coming week or grading term papers. He was totally exhausted. There was little doubt that the easy life had not found Thomas McDonald in Shady Grove.

Emil Wooler sat behind the cash register, eating a tuna fish sandwich while watching some celebrity profile show about Zsa Zsa and Eva Gabor on a small black and white TV set. As Thomas approached the window, the old man looked up and greeted him with a friendly smile.

“Evenin mister,” he said. “What can I do ya out of?”

“Give me ten dollars on number three, please,” Thomas said as he handed the old man a twenty-dollar bill.

Emil reached through the small slit in the window for the money as he clicked a few buttons on the register. “You’re that fella that bought the old Damon place, aren’t ya?” he asked.

“Pardon me?” Thomas replied, feeling a little agitated that Emil even dared to engage him in conversation.

“The little house out on the bay where that Damon girl used to live,” Emil explained.

“I don’t know anyone named Damon,” Thomas grunted.

“Oh well, that was a long time ago,” Emil continued, “long time ago. I reckon it must be going on thirty some odd years now.”

Thomas, still trying to figure out what Emil was talking about, replied in a huff, “Well, if it was that long ago, why do you still refer to it as the Damon place?”

“The girl!” Emil ardently replied. “That young girl they found drowned out there. Rachel Damon was her name. She’d only been here in town maybe a couple weeks when they found her floating face down out in the harbor. They figured she’d been in the water about a week or so. My cousin worked for Bayside back then as a police photographer. He took the pictures when they dragged her out of the bay. He showed me them pictures once, and well Mister, it weren’t pretty I can tell ya that, no sir.”

Thomas was listening intently now as the old man went on with his story.

“They wrote it off as accidental like, but some people here said it was more than likely suicide. Some even say it was that Sneed boy who lived next door to her that done it.”

“You mean the house across from mine?” Thomas asked.

“Yes sir,” Emil replied. “He was seen driving her all over town maybe a week or so before she was found. The Sheriff even brought him in to question him, but they could never prove anything and had to let the boy go. Back in them days they didn’t have none of that DNA stuff like they do on television now. Anyways, I guess life just never was the same for that boy in this town after that. People always staring at him and wonderin’. It got so bad that a few months later he packed it all in and left town. Went down Florida way I heard.”

“You don’t say? That’s quite a tale.” Thomas replied. “I wasn’t aware that our house had such an interesting history.”

Emil handed him his change. Thomas thanked him and turned to leave.

“By the way, I hear he’s back now,” Emil said.

Thomas stopped and looked back at the old man. “Who’s back?” he inquisitively asked.

“That Sneed boy. I dang near plum forgot. I get to gabbin and it musta slipped my fool mind. He’s all growed up now, but my wife told me she heard he moved back in town today. He’s back living in that same house, right next to yours. I figured you’d want to know. A lot of people in this town are gonna be a might unhappy to hear that boy is back. But I suspect you’ll find that out for yourself if ya stay around here long enough. It could be I’m wrong, mister, but that’s what I heard anyway.”

Thomas walked outside, standing in the fog, watching the numbers on the gas pump roll, thinking about the odd story the old man had just related to him. He finished pumping his gas and headed for home.

Back at the house, Jenni warmed up some leftovers from dinner, knowing her husband would be home shortly. Her daughter Jean was sitting on the living room floor humming a song to herself while engrossed with a picture she was drawing on a big sheet of colored construction paper. Jenni stepped out on the porch, impatiently anticipating her husband’s arrival. It was a very still night. The fog that had been rolling in off the bay all evening was steadily growing thicker. Jenni looked out as far as she could see, hoping to catch sight of her husband’s car lights coming up the drive.

The lights were on in Paul’s living room window. Jenni smiled as she thought about their conversation that morning. He seemed nice. She really liked him right away, and looked forward to talking to him again.

The only other light that was visible through the dense fog was from the lamppost at the end of the small wooden pier. The light shining through the fog gave the pier a misty haunting look, like something out of an old horror movie. While Jenni stood there looking, a young blond woman in a long dress mysteriously appeared out of nowhere. She walked out to the end of the pier, standing alone under the light. That’s odd, Jenni thought to herself as she strained to get a better look. Why in the world would anyone be out there at this time of night in all this fog?

As Jenni stood on the porch, wondering who the mysterious woman could be, she was distracted by the sound of a car coming up the drive. Gradually, two headlights appeared through the mist as her husband’s car came into the small clearing. When he exited the car, she held the screen door open as he despairingly walked up the steps onto the porch, his arms totally encumbered by a large stack of papers and his briefcase.

“I’m glad you’re home honey,” she said, kissing him.

“Me too,” Thomas replied in a tired voice.

He was about to go inside when Jenni stopped him.

“Thomas, there’s some woman out on the pier,” she said.

Thomas looked out toward the pier, wondering what she was talking about.

There was no one there.

“I don’t see anyone,” he said, sounding slightly annoyed.

“That’s strange,” Jenni replied as she looked again. “She was out there a few minutes ago.”

Thomas stared tiredly at his wife, looking uninterested. All he wanted to do was to get inside and relax. “Seeing things in the dark now, Jenni?” he callously asked as he brushed by her.

Inside the house, Jean had completed her drawing. Hearing her father’s voice, she excitedly ran to greet him.

“Daddy, daddy!” she yelled, “Look! I drew you a picture. I did it all by myself, just for you.”

Thomas took the colored piece of paper from his daughter’s hand and glanced quickly at the drawing.

“That’s nice sweetie,” he indifferently said.

He bent down and kissed her on the forehead to appease her and then wandered off to the kitchen, laying the drawing on the dining room table as he passed. Jenni closed the front door, irritated at her husband’s insensitivity. Noticing her daughter’s obvious disappointment, she knelt down and gave her a big hug.

“Daddy is just tired honey,” she said, comforting her. “Why don’t you get your things picked up and get ready for bed and I’ll let you stay up and watch television for a little while.”

Jean gathered up her crayons and paper and ran off to her room as Jenni headed for the kitchen to get her husband’s dinner. As she passed the dining room table, she casually glanced down at the drawing lying there. She gasped and took a step back, not believing what she was seeing. The drawing was of a young woman in a long dress standing alone on a pier.