



THE RETURNING

SHE WILL RISK EVERYTHING TO LEAD THEM OUT OF DARKNESS

RACHELLE DEKKER

PRAISE FOR THE SEER SERIES

“The strong female heroine will appeal to teen readers, and adults and teens alike may also enjoy the themes of corruption and religion, absolute human power, and government as God. . . . Dekker’s debut is worth choosing.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *The Choosing*

“The story vacillates between the sweetness of a tender coming-of-age romance and moments that almost resemble a Dean Koontz thriller. . . . At times frightening but often beautiful, [*The Choosing*] will leave readers eager for the next book of this new series.”

SERENA CHASE, *USA Today*

“[*The Choosing*] is an amazing debut novel full of heart, drama, and complex believable characters . . . with a detailed plot and gripping truths that pierced my heart.”

THE BOOK CLUB NETWORK INC.

“A swiftly moving plot puts readers in the center of the action, and the well-described setting adds to the experience. Deeper themes of value and worth will appeal to both young adult and adult readers.”

ROMANTIC TIMES on *The Choosing*

“Whatever expectations you have of debut author Rachelle Dekker, go ahead and put them aside. Rachelle, daughter

to bestselling author Ted Dekker, is carving out a space of her own. Her debut novel, *The Choosing*, is a rich statement about the author's future and her impact on Christian fiction."

FAMILY FICTION

"Ripe for discussion, [*The Choosing*] may inspire some readers to open up about the social pressures that they feel both in and out of their faith community. Expect it to appeal to dystopian fans of all ages."

FOREWORD REVIEWS

"Readers will find Dekker's storyline somewhat akin to her father's works in terms of action, adventure, and unpredictability. *The Choosing*, though, explores more the inner workings of her characters and how they feel about their lot in life. I look forward to more dystopian titles from Dekker in the near future."

BOOKREPORTER.COM

"*The Choosing* is an inspiring tale that reaches deep into the hearts of men and women, showing both the love and the darkness that can lurk within."

FRESH FICTION

"Marrying the themes of the popular Kiera Cass Selection novels with the action danger of *The Hunger Games*,

Dekker asserts a strong imaginative voice that had me gulping down sentences and events as quickly as they were relayed on [the] page.”

NOVEL CROSSING on *The Choosing*

“[*The Choosing*] is part adventure, part romance, part mystery, and it works. The writing is wonderful. It flows in such a way that it keeps the reader turning page after page . . . more than likely long into the night to find out what happens!”

RADIANT LIT

“In her stunning debut novel, Rachelle Dekker plunges readers into a unique yet familiar-feeling dystopian society, where one girl’s longing for acceptance, identity, and purpose becomes a mind-bending, pulse-pounding journey that’ll [leave] you breathless and reeling. A superb story!”

JOSH OLDS, LifelsStory.com

“This intense dystopian read was reminiscent of the *Divergent* series. Christian themes of God’s love and forgiveness are woven throughout [*The Calling*].”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“[Dekker’s] strong storytelling voice and ability to convey her ideas comes through nicely in this book.”

STRAIGHTOFFTHEPAGE.COM on *The Calling*

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The Returning

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Designed by Dean H. Renninger

The Returning is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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YEAR
2278

Trylin City sat against the monstrous mountain that served as its protecting spine. What was once a myth was now a functioning sanctuary for all those called to live outside the Authority City. Tall and majestic, the mountain's rocky peak shielded the city from sight and offered healthy soil at its roots, fresh spring water from its depths, indestructible stone for the walls, and a constant sense of security.

The morning was in full swing through the city streets, excitement swimming through the air. Everyone knew what today represented.

Carrington sat on her bed, the windows pulled closed. She wanted a moment to herself before the rest of the day dragged her into its depths.

A small cardboard box sat to her right. Folded paper filled its insides—letters and reminders of her past. Secrets she kept from everyone, even Remko. She glanced down at the unfolded letter she held between her fingers. It trembled as her eyes drank in the words once more.

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November 12, 2260

*My dearest Elise,
My heart is heavy today. Sometimes I fear that it will weigh me down with such ferociousness that I will never be able to walk again. I know that letting this pain cripple me hurts all those around me, but I can't seem to see through the darkness long enough to take hold of the light. I can see the hopelessness in your father's eyes. He has no idea how to help me; I hope he knows that I don't blame him for that. How could he possibly rescue me from this?*

If I'm being honest, I'm not sure I want to be rescued. Would I even deserve to be happy after what I've done to you? Aaron sits with me often and tells me to remember and trust in the power that holds you. A power that cannot be threatened, that cannot be harmed, and at moments I feel that power as well. It allows me small moments of peace, but then I think of the power holding you close and I wish it were me. I find myself envious of the power and then angry that I've lost you and then shame because I let you be taken.

Do you hate me for that? You must. Are you suffering because I failed you as a mother? I have to stop my mind from wandering too far down the dark road that brings visions of what terrible things could be happening to you. If I go too far down that path, I will surely not survive.

RACHELLE DEKKER

Today is worse because today you turn two years old. I wonder if you're talking yet. What have you learned to say? I imagine you walking about, your legs finally growing strong enough to keep you steady, your mind full of questions about the world around you. Who is watching you grow? Who is teaching you?

It should be me.

Please forgive me for not being there. Please forgive me, for I will never forgive myself.

Your mother

Carrington clenched her eyes tightly to capture her tears and hold them back. She knew rereading these letters only brought pain, but after all these years of suffering it somehow felt comforting as well. More often than she'd like to admit, she'd steal away, pull out all the letters she'd written to her lost daughter, and read them, hoping, for just a moment, to be reconnected with her.

Carrington could hear the excitement building outside. The music had started. Voices of jubilation filled the air, and children's laughter echoed against the mountain, thrilling anticipation pulsing against the city walls. For weeks people had been preparing for today. For years they had been dreaming about this moment.

The prophecy was unfolding, and the time had come for them to send out the chosen Seven who would bring about the Awakening. The ones who would cross the

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wilderness back to the Authority City and finally bring the evil regime to its knees.

She whisked away the few tears that had escaped down her cheeks and folded the letter back into the box. She replaced the lid and moved to store it deep within her closet.

Moving to stand in front of the mirror, Carrington surveyed herself. She was dressed in plain tan slacks, a white button-down shirt, and her favorite navy cargo jacket. Her hair was pulled back and secured at the nape of her neck, showing her face clearly. Looking at herself, she noticed how time had changed her skin. There were lines in places that had once been smooth, wrinkles where the skin had been tight, and discoloring where it had been clear.

The physical changes didn't bother her usually, but now she found herself struggling to pull her mind away from the differences as she stared at her reflection. Not because she wished she looked different; more because it meant that twenty years had really passed to lead them to this moment. Twenty years of change and aging since she'd stood on the outskirts of the Authority City and left her daughter behind.

Another round of tears threatened to descend, and she took a deep breath to chase them away. She needed to clear her mind if she was going to survive today. She shouldn't have reached for those letters. She ran her hands along the sides of her jacket and questioned her clothing choice. It was a ceremony after all; maybe she should have worn a dress?

Carrington could feel the tremble starting again in her hands and she took another deep breath, moving away from the mirror. Her head swam with emotion and she tried to shake it free. She glanced at the clock on the wall and knew Remko would be expecting her any moment. She didn't have time to change into anything else, so she supposed what she was wearing was going to have to do. Moving through the motions of her typical routine, she turned off the lights, rechecked the closed window, locked the door, and descended the front staircase onto the street.

All around her were faces of people she knew. They smiled and waved, pure joy dancing across their expressions; Carrington waved back, masking the panic and worry building behind her own.

Each step toward Trylin's city center, where the ceremony was being held, was familiar. Carrington's legs had traversed this route hundreds of times. But they felt heavy, as if they knew this time the walk was different.

She was about to step off the main paved road into an alley to collect herself when a strong arm wrapped itself around her. Carrington turned to see Lucy Carson smiling at her. Carrington eased a bit and returned a genuine smile.

Lucy looked so much like her mother, Selena; the girl was now in her thirties, with bold, dark features and stunning black hair. Her eyes, however, mirrored those of her late older sister, Arianna, to whom Carrington owed so much.

Like Arianna, Lucy had an incredible gift of intuition,

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something she'd learned to tap into as she'd grown in the truth of the Father and spent time learning at Aaron's feet. She was filled with peace and beauty beyond her years, and staring at her now, Carrington couldn't deny her envy.

"How are you?" Lucy asked.

Carrington fought off the urge to divulge all her hidden worry to the woman and merely smiled.

Lucy nodded and pulled Carrington closer as the two women slowly walked the road toward the main gathering. "That's what I thought."

"You shouldn't be here. Lesley will be in a panic," Carrington said.

Lucy gave a soft chuckle and shrugged. "I'm on my way. I just thought I'd check on you first. I know that while this day marks something phenomenal for most of us, it's clouded with fear for you."

"I'm fine, Lucy," Carrington lied. She could feel the girl's eyes on her and suddenly wished to be invisible. She knew even as Lucy opened her mouth to speak that she was going to have to work very hard to keep her walls up around her storming emotions.

"It happens in a flash, like a sneaky fox—suddenly the truth of your identity is replaced by the illusions of your mistakes," Lucy said softly. She paused and nodded to herself before a small smile caught her mouth. "Arianna used to say that to me, and I never understood what she meant."

Carrington could see pain working its way into Lucy's expression.

“She said so much to me in those last few months that sounded like madness,” Lucy went on. “I remember desperately wanting to understand. I knew she was upsetting my parents. They would fight over how to handle her rebellion, as they called it, and I knew that if she didn’t stop she was headed for trouble.”

Lucy paused for a moment, her eyes staring down at her feet as they continued slowly toward their destination. “I went to her once. It was late; I was supposed to be in bed, but I couldn’t sleep. I was too worried. I begged her to change, to obey the rules, to listen to our father, to be the girl she once was. I cried and asked her to do it for me, to think about me, because I couldn’t lose her. Even then, I knew they would take her from me if she continued.

“She cried too. The bedroom was dark, but I could clearly see her face glistening with tears and broken from pain but with such resolve in her eyes. I remember because it was hard to make eye contact with her. I’d never seen her so sure of anything. Then she walked over to me, knelt so that our faces were close, softly brushed her thumb across my cheek, and said, ‘My sweet Lucy, I *am* doing this for you.’”

Carrington’s chest ached and she wished she could think of something to say that might offer some consolation, but she came up empty.

“After Arianna’s execution, I felt completely responsible. She’d done this all for me—she’d even told me so. We were sisters, and I was supposed to protect her. The shame I carried around beat down on me internally until I bled.”

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“Lucy, that was not your fault,” Carrington said.

“Just as Elise being taken was not yours,” Lucy said.

Carrington stopped in her tracks, all images of Lucy and Arianna clearing from her mind. “That is totally different.”

“Is it?” Lucy asked. “And now, with Kennedy leaving with the chosen Seven, do you carry blame for that also?”

Carrington swallowed hard against the tight ball forming in her throat. Images of both her daughters filled the space behind her eyes. “I am their mother.”

Lucy gave Carrington’s arm a squeeze and Carrington fought back the tears threatening to escape. “No, Carrington, their mother is a role you play, but it is not who you are. Like a sneaky little fox, suddenly the truth of your identity is replaced by the illusion of your mistakes.”

Carrington wanted to pull away from Lucy’s touch and hide in a dark place, but the younger woman’s grip was solid and the truth of her words kept Carrington’s feet in place.

“Let go of the grievances you hold against yourself, and know all that has happened and will happen is held under the power of the Father. The light that has been our strength will never fail us.”

The tears Carrington had been holding back slid down her cheeks and the tremble in her hands resurfaced. Thoughts of her daughters collided inside her head. The one she’d watched grow into a beautiful, independent, secure woman, and the other she’d only dreamed of. One she’d held too closely because she’d let the other be taken.

One who now wanted to leave in hopes of rescuing the other, but all Carrington could think about was losing them both.

Lucy slid her hand up to Carrington's shoulder. "Remember who you are. Who Elise is and who Kennedy is, and who calls them His own."

Carrington knew Lucy was right, but acknowledging that truth would mean giving up her right to be angry and afraid, and she wasn't ready to do that. She wanted to tell Lucy so, wanted to claim Lucy wasn't a mother so she couldn't possibly understand what she was asking Carrington to do, but a loud pounding rhythm filled the air and drowned out her unspoken words.

The ceremony drums had started. The two of them were very late.