

# SUSPENDED

Daniel J Roozen

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Edited by Daniel J Roozen

To my parents, Peter and Holly,  
and my loving wife Jamie  
who always encouraged me  
in my writing.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Heaven

**YEAR: 2012**

A Toyota pulled to a stop in front of a gas station between Point A and Point B. It stopped just long enough for Heaven to grab the duffel bag containing all of her earthly possessions and get out of the car. *Figures*, she thought with a shake of the head.

She pulled the beanie down over her ears, a cheap winter hat she picked up at the last gas station she was dumped at, and watched the Toyota disappear. The sign on the side of the road read: Des Moines - 50 Miles. Thoroughly frozen by a passing breeze, she pulled her windbreaker together and zipped it up, hoping to fend off some of the winter cold. It wasn't enough, though, with how cold winter was this year as they headed into December, and it just got colder the farther north she went. *Got to just keeping moving.*

Heaven pulled out a crinkled 4x6 of a middle-aged man posing in front of Mount Rushmore. Somewhat tacky, she would admit, but it meant freedom to her. Freedom. Something these people in their foreign cars, wrapped up in their mundane lives, knew little about. Carefully, she slipped the picture back into her pants pocket.

Qwik Stop. Another tacky name for a place that meant you can get (almost) everything here. Hefting the duffel bag over her shoulder, Heaven trod past the pumps to the gas station entrance. One man finished filling his

Honda, hung up the pump, and drove off. Other than that the place seemed pretty empty, just a small town and a refuel between here and there. The bell on the door jangled as she entered.

Heaven turned her jacket pocket inside out and examined the money in her hand. Not much left, just a few bills and a few small coins. Her stomach rumbled, encouraging her to put her last bit of cash towards food, but she didn't have enough to go all the way. There was no way she was going back now, though.

Walking slowly towards the back of the store, Heaven took stock of the situation. The attendant stood on a chair behind the counter near the exit, refueling their cigarette stash, or something equally as boring. She felt her heart beat a bit faster as she neared the coolers in the back. Propping the cooler door open, with one hand she grabbed an egg salad sandwich and with the other hand she slipped a small carton of chocolate milk into the front pouch of her bag.

She held back a yelp as the bell on the door jarred her concentration. She stole a glance back as another man — burly, hairy, and wearing a black leather jacket — entered the Qwik Stop. Must have been a biker, she figured. The attendant greeted him and a tingle went down her arms as her adrenaline level went up.

Heaven waited as the biker ducked into the bakery cabinet for a few donuts, then she swiped several meat sticks from a nearby display and stuck them in the pocket of her windbreaker. She checked on the attendant at the register; he didn't seem to notice her. Her heart jumped again — the kind of thrill that one could get addicted to — and she grabbed a bag of cookies to hide behind her belt.

She walked down the aisle, slowly now, afraid of raising suspicion. “Hey,” she said when she reached the counter, tossing the sandwich down.

The attendant — she looked at his name tag; Larry —

grabbed the sandwich and scanned it. "3.25," he said flatly. Heaven tossed some money on the counter and tapped her foot impatiently, waiting for the change. The biker came up behind her and dropped his donuts on the counter.

Heaven mumbled a quick "thanks" and walked out the door, the two behind her chatting about yesterday's football game. She leaned against the store's window and listened to the hum of the motorcycle engine as she breathed a sigh of relief. It didn't seem to matter whether it was brand name jeans or a bit of food, the anxiety, and the thrill, was the same.

*The hum of the motorcycle engine.* A Boss Hoss, ZZ4 bike with a V8 Chevrolet engine and a long orange flame on the side. She smiled. The keys were still hanging in the dash. It didn't take more than that split second for her to realize that this was her ticket to the Minnesota Twin Cities. The anxiety, and the thrill, spiked again.

She climbed on top, keeping an eye on the door. The owner lingered inside, laughing with the attendant. She looked down at her feet. "Come on, Heaven." She had to have seen this done a hundred times on TV, right? Kicking up the stand, she put her weight down on the clutch with her right foot, twisted the handle, and the Boss took off. The bike twisted and quickly fell on its side, pitching Heaven onto the pavement.

She looked up, eyes wide in fear. The biker knew there was a problem now. He was out the door as soon as Heaven had the bike back up, but by then it was too late. She throttled up and took off.

Heaven cheered and the tires screeched as she peeled out of the station's lot, fist held high in triumph. When the gas station sat in her rear view mirrors she took the time to look back at a very angry man, rage red and screaming epithets. Heaven laughed, the anxiety gone now, replaced by a kind of high.

The sign read "Des Moines - 50 Miles," but she now

had her ticket all the way to Mount Rushmore.

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Heaven carefully carried a tray of poker chips in various colors through the casino. They were small denominations, of course, the last of her food and travel money, and she had to use a fake ID to get in. She had a foster brother once, Jake, who had an acute interest in different forms of gambling, one of the few nice memories of foster care. But he never let her come out gambling with him, however much she asked.

Blackjack, Poker, Texas Hold-Em. All card games. “Don’t bother with the slots or Roulette,” he had told her, as if he was an expert at the casino, and maybe he was. “Those are silly games of chance. You’ve got no control. Stick to cards.” There was still chance in cards, but there was also strategy. And then there were tricks.

Heaven slipped her ID away and headed for the Black Jack table. *Today I am Juliet Foster, 18 and playing at the casino for seven months now*, she thought, head held high. She took a seat at the end of a blackjack table and plopped down a one dollar ante.

“You have to keep track,” Jake’s voice echoed in her mind. He had trained her for this. He’d spend his nights and weekends at the casino — their foster dad certainly didn’t care; he just wanted the monthly check — and then come back and teach her the tricks of the trade. “At the beginning, hold back. Everything is a mystery. The chance for getting any particular card is the same. But as the game goes on, you’ll know more about what’s coming.”

She glanced nervously at the guy on her right: 40-something, average height, brown hair, and glasses. Harmless. A nice guy, even. “What’s your name?” she asked as the dealer tossed out the first set of cards. One

down, one up. She got a nine of hearts.

“Joe,” he said. “You?”

“Just Joe?”

He smiled, peaking at his face down card. He looked at her over his reading glasses. “Hit,” he called. “Yep, just Joe.”

“Miss?”

“Huh?”

“The dealer is asking if you want another card,” Joe explained.

“Oh, I’m good,” she said, after taking a brief glance at her card. “My name’s Juliet,” she told Joe.

“Pretty name. Nice to meet you.”

“Can you teach me how to play?” A smile, a flip of her golden curls, and a flutter of her eyelashes and he was under her spell. She’d seen it before with guys when a pretty girl looked their way. He would now hit when she needed him to hit, or stay when she needed the card.

In a few hours, and a couple other tables and a couple other guys, Heaven had turned her few dollars into ten thousand. She had been playing cards for a long time at her foster homes, but wasn’t sure so much about the casinos. When people counted cards in movies, not to mention get in with a fake ID, casino security only ever came just when the plot demanded. But when did they come in real life?

She decided not to chance it and gathered up her chips to cash out. As she wound back through the casino, on a whim, she flipped a hundred dollar chip into the glass of a guy at the slots. Free money felt sooo good.

Heaven grabbed her duffel bag from the lockers before heading to the cashier station. “How much do we have?” the cashier asked in a grating tone when Heaven set her tray down. She tapped her foot impatiently and scanned the casino for security. “Looks like ten thousand. You certainly played well tonight. I’ll have to get this from the safe.”



She heard a scream and some commotion from behind and she twisted her neck to look. A tall Latino woman squeezed her man in glee; he had just proposed. On the other end of the spectrum, an older man cursed loudly as he backed away from the roulette table, losing his bet once again.

“Here we are,” the cashier said, coming back with the money. Heaven had to stop herself from jumping. At that moment she caught sight of two hefty men in black suits fighting through the crowd towards the cashier station. Definitely towards her, she noticed as she met their stare.

“Right. That looks right. Thanks,” she said quickly, grabbing the money and stuffing it in her bag. *They’re too late*, she thought as she rushed out of the casino.

She heard the cashier behind her calling out about leaving her ID, but she ignored her. Let them have it; she needed her freedom.

## **THE EVENT**

Heaven gunned it as soon as she left the casino parking lot. In seconds she was on the Interstate and back in the open air. Not far down the line she noticed the cherries light up in her mirror and she wasn’t sure whether the cops were coming for her, so she pulled off at the first exit and coasted into the suburbs.

Heaven rolled the motorcycle to a stop at an intersection. *It might be best after all*, she figured. It was already dark and despite bringing her warmest coat, a windbreaker which seemed to do anything but, she was shivering.

The snowfall wasn’t too heavy yet this year, though the white fluff coated the edges of the roads at least down to the Iowa border. It was beautiful, the trees lined with fresh white snow. If only it didn’t have to be so cold. But she’d take the cold over the place she came from.

The sign read: Mapiya, population 14,500. Southern

St. Paul suburb. She scanned the buildings and street signs for an open — and dare she hope, cheap — hotel at this time of night. Heaven noticed a gas station up the hill a block ahead. Hopefully someone there could give her directions.

She pushed down on the clutch and started the bike back up when everything changed. The night sky flooded with bright blue afternoon light, blinding her. Heaven covered her eyes when she felt an instant blast of summer heat, practically burning her skin it felt so hot compared to the winter air.

The change came so suddenly she felt sick. A moment ago she was shivering from the winter, and now she was getting goose bumps from the hard rush of hot air. Her eyes were just beginning to adjust when she heard the sound of a freight train in the sky. Heaven opened her eyes and looked up.

The sky that was empty just a moment ago was rushing in with dark clouds, swirling just above her, it seemed. Such a fearful sight, but it felt so surreal that she just sat there and watched. Thick clouds turning, spinning, reaching down from the sky. Heaven grew up in Missouri, around tornadoes her whole life, so she knew what it meant; it was a wall cloud, forming into a tornado, but this was the first time she had seen one form right in front of her like this. Staring at the forming tornado, for a moment she almost forgot that night had instantly fled. *Mesmerizing.*

“Hey!” Someone crashed out of a building on her left. “Hey, you on the bike,” he called out to her, but Heaven ignored him, shock setting in. The clouds reached lower, the tornado forming together now, almost to a point. The man ran up and jerked her off the bike, pulling her out of shock. The bike fell hard on its side. She ran with him back to the building to stand just inside the doorway and watch the tornado come.

As the tornado stretched to the ground it turned north,

railing loudly on them now. The tornado touched down, it looked like, just north of there, over a hill. Another man, coming up a stairway behind them, shoved them aside as he ran out of the building, holding a phone to his ear. Standing in the middle of the street he finally noticed the tornado and brought his hands down, staring up in awe.

“Can I use your bike?” the man beside her asked, his eyes wild in desperation. She noticed he was younger, maybe her age, and dressed a bit strangely.

“What?”

“I’m parked up north, past the bridge. I need to...” He looked up at the tornado again as it tossed debris in the air. “I need to follow that.”

“Sure. Come on.” They ran out to her motorcycle, picked it up off the ground, and she handed him a spare helmet. “Just promise not to fall in love with me.”

He blushed, caught off guard. “Isn’t that what girls might say when they like a guy?”

Heaven shrugged. “What can I say? You’re cute.”

# CHAPTER TWO

## Chevelle

**YEAR: 2099**

Chevelle glanced up at the teacher, his long crooked nose firmly planted in the class textbook, and tapped nervously on her desk with the stylus. She contemplated the question glowing on her desk screen — a question on a flat from the 2000's, or the Aughts as they used to call that time period. How was she supposed to know? She wasn't really interested in classic movies.

*It was your assignment*, she thought, her inner critic rearing its ugly face again. But at a time when movies can surround you in all their glory, there's so much more she can do than watching the old flats. Like boys.

She stole a sidelong glance at the guy on her right, Blayze Clay, quarterback on the football team, the Mapiya Moonbacks, and a definite hottie. He seemed to be getting along on his test just fine. She leaned over a bit farther to catch a glimpse of the answer. Chevelle grinned as she turned back to her desk and scribbled the answer with the stylus.

Next question. Blayze caught her with a glance and she smiled wide. He tossed her a wink and shifted his posture so she'd be able to read his desk easier.

“Forgot to study the assignment again, Chevelle?”

Chevelle jerked back and looked to the front of the room. The teacher's textbook lay lonely on his desk. She turned slowly and looked up at him with the best puppy dog face she could manage. “My... dog ate the assignment?”

The teacher folded his arms. “You’ll have to do better than that. You’re going to spend the afternoon in detention with me. And you, Mr. Clay...” Blayze snapped to attention. “Accomplices get to come, too. I’ll see both of you at three o’clock.”

After class, Chevelle shut off her desk and filed in line to exit, disappointed only in getting caught. *Chevy, you’ve got to do your own work to get ahead*, Eric would say. *Bah!* Next time she’d get the SparkNotes.

“Hey, Chevelle,” Blayze said, stepping out of the classroom behind her. “You got a minute?”

She tucked her bangs back behind her ear. “Sure. Sorry... about getting you in trouble back there.”

“Nah, no worries,” he said. “I wanted to ask you a question. The Summer Dance is coming up this weekend, and I was wondering if anyone had asked you yet.” Ever since there was a federal law making school a year round event, summer vacation sprinkled throughout the year instead, the Summer Dance had become big. Almost, but not quite, *prom* big.

Chevelle perked up — she had been waiting for this question — and shook her head. There was this one kid, and she felt sorry for him, but word from her girlfriends was that someone on the football team was going to ask her, so she held out.

“Would you go with me?” he asked.

Chevelle tilted her head with a smile, slipped on her overly large sunglasses, and nodded before she started to turn away. “I’d love to,” she said, not letting him see the smile that beamed from cheek to cheek. She put a sway in her walk for Blayze’s benefit. *Just wait until I tell Eric*, she thought. *He won’t believe it!*

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“Whaddya think?” Chevelle asked. She stood in Vis á

Vis, a top name fashion store at the mall, in one of their forty holooms. The shopping style of using hologram fitting rooms became popular when effective holograms were invented. Instantly being able to see yourself in a piece of clothing required a lot less floor space for the actual clothing, replaced by open rooms with a human size holoprojector and computer interface.

Chevelle held her head up with an air of entitlement. Eric, her best friend since childhood, sat loosely draped over the couch and she did a little twirl in front of him. It was so exciting! This red one came down just enough in the front with the V-Neck to say, “available, but not to just anyone.”

Eric waved his hand to say the dress was just so-so. “Okay, I’ve got three others lined up. Just hang on.”

She turned back to the computer’s holographic interface, glad to have Eric with her to get it right. Yeah, it was girly stuff, but this was their thing; he was up for anything. They had been hanging out so long, he was more like her brother than anything, she figured.

The red dress shimmered away. The next dress was short and blue, still sparkling, but with a sharp black outline and a very low back. Chevelle looked at herself in the mirror and decided it said gorgeous and modest in the front, but the back said that she also had a wild side.

When she turned out to Eric, though, he quickly shot it down. “Too revealing,” he said, sounding like that overprotective brother again. Chevelle sighed and turned back to the computer. Well, that was why she brought him with, right? Besides the fact that he had the air to get her here; she hadn’t yet bothered to get her driver’s license.

The third dress she wasn’t so sure of. There wasn’t anything particularly wrong with it; it just seemed a bit... boring? And she couldn’t figure out if sequins were her style, but the black certainly complimented her hair. She finally decided she’d try it out anyways.

She noticed Eric's eyes widen when she made the selection and the hologram covering her shifted to the black dress. "That's the dress," he said.

"Are you sure?" She looked down at it again. The dress went all the way to the floor, and the slit only brought it up to the knee.

"Turn around," he said, and so she did. "Yeah, that's definitely the dress."

"I don't know. You think he'll like it?"

"I'd date you with that dress," he blurted out, and it kind of took her aback. *He doesn't really think that...* "I mean, that's how much he'll like it. Trust me," he quickly corrected. *Whew.*

"Okay, let's get it then."

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Chevelle tossed her new dress over the back of the chair at her desk and plopped herself down on her twin bed. She propped herself up with a large pillow and shoved a purple lollipop in her mouth. She looked at her left hand. Three thin metal strips conformed to her hand, reaching from her wrist to the tips of her fingers; it was the latest in mobile phone technology. Clenching her hand like she was holding a brick, the metal strips glowed and a holographic computer interface formed in her hand.

She found Eric's number and let the phone dial. Pulling back the silk curtains just above her bed, she saw the lights in her next door neighbor's window switch on and soon Eric came online. Her window looked across a short gap of yard straight into Eric's room. "Hello?"

"You're not asleep yet, are you?" she asked, a bit of a tease in her voice.

"No. Just got upstairs. The nurse is making dinner," he said.

Chevelle dropped her voice to a more serious tone.

“How’s he doing?”

“Not so good. I’m trying not to think about it.” Chevelle’s heart went out to him; he didn’t sound so good. She could hear his voice squeak as he talked. “I just wish my mom were here.”

*Probably best to change the subject.* She saw Eric pull open his curtains and sit at his desk, feet up on the table and snacking on a half-eaten box of Fig Newtons. “So what do you think of Blayze?” she asked, a bit concerned now. Eric always tried to be upbeat, but Chevelle wasn’t certain whether he really approved.

“I don’t know,” Eric said with a shrug.

“Come on. You play on the same team. You must know something about him.”

“Blayze is okay, but he’s not exactly known for paying attention to the girls.”

*And that might be okay,* she thought. She was uncertain yet whether it was social status or the thrill of a new boy that excited her. Chevelle played with the lollipop in her mouth. “We spent lunch together talking, and we have a couple of classes together,” she said, taking the lollipop out for a second to examine it. “He seems all right.”

“Well, I hope you have fun at the dance, then,” Eric said.

“You’re really not going to come?”

He shrugged again, chomping down on another Fig Newton. “I’ve got no one to go with,” he said with his mouth full.

“Just ask someone, anyone. It’s not that hard.”

He laughed. “Yeah, maybe not for you, Chevelle Ewens, Princess of Mapiya High,” he teased.

“You know what you need to do, for your school project?” she said with a smile.

“What’s that?”

“You need to investigate. Tomorrow is Wednesday, right? We could skip lunch, check out the town, and be



back for 3rd Period.”

“We can’t just go there,” he said, taking his feet off the desk. “South Mapiya is cordoned off by the government for one thing. There’s a guard and barb wire fences...”

“Aw, come on. It’ll be fun,” she insisted.

“Do you know how disappointed my dad would be if he found out I was skipping school?” This was Eric, though. He’d cave if she put enough pressure on him. “And what do you think we’ll find? It’s a wasteland; there’s nothing to see.”

Chevelle crunched down on the lollipop and threw the now empty stick in the trash. “So you think the government fenced off the place and put up guards because there was nothing to see?” she asked.

“Well, I don’t know.”

“Besides, what’s the worst that could happen? We’re still minors. If we got caught they’ll yell at us a bit, have our parents give us a slap on the wrist, and we’ll be ready for the dance on Saturday.”

“Yeah, back to that...” Eric said.

“Be nice, Eric. Blayze is a good guy.”

“No, that’s not it. He’s fine, sure, but...”

“How about Dorothy from second period? You’d like her; she’s kind of hot.” It was Tuesday, July 7th, so he had only three days left to find a date.

Eric shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I just don’t feel like going. Dances aren’t really my thing.”

Now he was just making excuses. “That’s not what you said last year when Caydance invited you to the prom.”

“Ha! She was three years older than me and it was the Senior prom!” Then he had to cover for himself. “I mean, not that proms are my thing either, but...”

“But she was certainly better — how do you want to say it — better *built* than us Sophomores your age,” she finished for him.

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