

# *Heaven's Prey*

## REDEMPTION'S EDGE BOOK ONE

### Chapter One

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# Chapter 1

Another gust of wind pelted rain against the kitchen window. Ruth Warner sopped up the last of her homemade chili with a thick slice of sourdough bread. Too bad she didn't have time for a little more.

The kitchen lights flickered, and her husband, Tony, groaned. "I hope the power holds. There's a ball game on later." He carried their cutlery and bowls to the sink and rinsed them more carefully than Ruth would have done. She'd wiped hers clean enough with the bread. It could have gone straight into the dishwasher.

Tony turned from the sink, bowl in hand. "Why don't you stay home tonight? It's nasty out there."

Halifax didn't often get storms this bad. If only she could avoid going back out in it. But since Harry Silver had escaped from prison, her weekly prayer meeting was more important than ever. Ruth grinned at her husband. "It's prayer, not baseball—they don't call rain delays. Don't worry, I won't melt." She tucked a pocket-sized Bible and notebook into her purse.

Tony walked away from the sink, dripping water on the floor from the bowl he'd been rinsing. He blocked Ruth's way out of the kitchen, feet wide, other hand

planted on his hip. His stare pushed her back a step. "This is about Silver's escape. Isn't it?"

The flat accusation in his voice twisted Ruth's stomach into knots. She looked past him to the front entranceway. "I told Norma I'd pick her up. She's nervous driving when it's windy." She sidestepped around him but he caught her arm and drew her back toward the counter.

"The truth, babe." His frown pulled his eyebrows into one, his mouth a thin line. The look his secretary said was so effective with troublemakers at school.

Ruth sighed. He wasn't supposed to use that look on her. "Tony, Pastor Linton said praying for Harry would be part of my healing. You know I didn't want to, but he was right."

"Harry? This is the filth that murdered our niece, and you're calling him by his first name as if he's a buddy? Listen to yourself!"

His face darkened, and his grip on Ruth's forearm shook. He flung his other arm back as if to set the chili bowl in the sink, but the bowl shattered against the faucet. Ceramic shards skittered across the countertop and dropped onto the floor.

Tony went still. He barely glanced at the mess before his eyes held Ruth's again. He let go of her arm.

Ruth didn't move. The wall clock ticked louder and louder.

She counted out a full minute. Guilt wormed in her stomach. Why had she called Harry by name? She couldn't pray for him as "Silver" because it felt disrespectful, but Tony wouldn't get that. Men called one another by their last names and thought nothing of it.

Ruth pressed her lips together. What Tony really didn't get was his wife praying for the man who'd raped

and murdered their niece. A niece they loved like the daughter they couldn't have.

Memories flickered. Susan at age ten, flour on her nose, making Christmas cookies and giggling. At fourteen, clinging to her mother, then to Ruth, during her father's cancer treatments.

Ruth's hands clenched until her nails dug into her palms. Alden had lived, thank God. But Susan—such a tragic, brutal, horrible death. How could Ruth make her husband understand the healing she'd found in forgiveness? The concern she'd developed for Harry's soul?

Did Tony think she'd betrayed Susan by praying for her killer?

Ruth stepped nearer. "Tony, he's out there somewhere tonight. I can't help search, but I can pray for the ones hunting him. I don't want any more young women to die."

Tony folded his arms across his chest. "Then pray here. Don't sneak out and do it behind my back."

Ruth squeezed her Bible through the soft leather of her purse. "That makes it sound like I'm cheating on you. I do pray here. But there's power in group prayer, and this is too big for me to carry alone."

"I see."

She locked his gaze. "Tell you what—I'll stay home if you'll pray with me."

Tony's eyes narrowed even more, focused to burn. "This has gone far enough. Your faith made a good support to get over the grief. Fine. Now forget about Silver. I don't want you praying for him. I don't want you talking about him. This obsession stops now."

"It's not—"

"It's him or me, Ruth. You choose."

Tony spun on his heel and kicked a piece of ceramic out of his path. Without another word, he yanked the basement door open, slammed it shut behind him and stomped down the stairs.

Ruth pressed a hand against her trembling lips and stared at the closed door. What just happened? *God, don't make me choose.* After a minute she grabbed the broom and dustpan from the closet and swept up the pieces of the bowl.

Going after Tony now would only make things worse. Better if they both cooled down first. She checked the time. Norma would be waiting.

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Ruth sat with a handful of others around the table. On a stormy night like this, Pastor Linton could have cancelled. Nobody would have complained. Ruth's spirit drew comfort from the chance to be here, though. She'd meant what she told Tony. This burden was too much to carry alone.

She glanced at the list in her notebook. Mary's surgery, Al's daughter, the upcoming youth mission tour. Listening to the rain beating against the windows, she spoke her own request. "Harry Silver."

Someone sighed. Her friend Norma gave a reassuring nod. George, the elderly man opposite her, twitched his lips in a flash smile. He'd lost his daughter to a drunk driver, and he'd confided to Ruth that he prayed for the man every morning.

Ruth sat straighter in her chair. Each week she mentioned Harry's name the undercurrent of tension

increased, but she couldn't keep silent. Especially now that he'd escaped from prison.

Pastor Linton tapped his pen against his chin. "If we were honest, we'd have to admit this is one soul we don't particularly want to see saved. Harry Silver deserves to end up in hell."

The atmosphere thickened. One or two heads nodded slowly. Few people met his eyes. Ruth waited.

A smile softened the pastor's pockmarked face. "That's natural, but remember God is supernatural. In Second Peter, it says He is not willing for anyone to perish. That includes this man, whether we like it or not. Silver has to make his own choice, but God can work in his heart. Our job is to join Ruth in this prayer and leave the results up to the Lord."

He surveyed the group. "Are there other requests? No? Then let's come before our Father."

Ruth bowed her head with the rest. Eyes closed, hands clasped, she let the silence seep into her soul. God is here. Creator, King, Father.

Soft voices spoke in turn, addressing needs, affirming God's sovereign ability to make a difference. More than one offered a sentence or two for Harry.

Finally Pastor Linton said, "Bless us now, and see each one safely home. Amen."

"Amen."

The word echoed in the hush around the meeting room table. Ruth opened her eyes. Only seven of them had braved the storm tonight, but the room carried an almost tangible charge from the intensity of their prayers. Her spirit held a peace, a strength she needed to take home with her.

Beside her, Norma stood and stretched. Like a chain reaction, the rest of them started to move. A few drifted toward the coffee carafe, talking in low tones. The wind howled louder and the rain rapped harder against the window.

Ruth poured herself a fresh cup of coffee, postponing the inevitable drenching. . . and the rematch with her husband. She should have asked for prayer for that, for the words to help him understand, and for a persuasive way to say them.

A touch on her arm made her jump. Pastor Linton spoke in her ear. "You're quiet tonight. Don't give up. God will work it out."

"I hope so." It wasn't until he turned to say goodnight to one of the others that she realized he hadn't been talking about her marriage.

Norma stood near the coat rack, zipping up an almost floor-length black plastic raincoat. Next would come the bright yellow Sou'wester rain hat. Ruth didn't know where the older woman found these treasures, but she couldn't argue with their usefulness.

Ruth downed the rest of her coffee and shrugged into her own rain gear. She'd brought a tie-on plastic hat herself tonight, even though she hated them. She hated wet curls plastered to her scalp even more. "I'll bring the car around for you, Norma. It's like the wind's dumping the whole Atlantic Ocean down on us. At this rate, half of Nova Scotia will be under water before morning."

After Norma had slowly and carefully folded her arthritic joints into the passenger seat, Ruth eased out of the parking lot with the others. At least the streets were empty. A gust of wind broadsided the car, and Ruth

narrowly missed hitting the curb. Norma squeaked and grabbed the dashboard.

Ruth clung to the steering wheel, peering ahead through the rain. She wasn't a nervous driver, but anything could happen in conditions like this. Concentrating so hard on the road should have kept her from thinking about facing Tony when she got home, but anxiety and caffeine—and tonight's prayer time—had her thoughts buzzing.

"Norma, when Pastor John suggested I pray for Harry Silver, I refused. But God told me to do this. How can I make Tony see when he doesn't think God's real?"

"Did you tell him about the nightmares?"

"He'd say it was all in my head. He thinks the healing is, too. Prayer brought me back from a dark, angry place. I worked hard to get here. Every time the hatred came back, I had to choose to forgive Harry again. To keep praying for him."

Ruth stopped at a red light. "Tony thinks it's about me, but it's not anymore. It's about redemption for Harry Silver. I don't know how God will do it, or if Harry will let Him, but I know He wants to. God loves him, in spite of what he's done."

Rain pinged off the car roof, poured down the windshield. Ruth flicked the wipers onto high. Prayer was supposed to build up, to heal. But her intercession for Harry lodged between them like a rusty ax-head, widening the grief-crack in their marriage.

She eyed the convenience store on the far side of the intersection. When the traffic light turned green, she pulled into the lot. "I should get some chips for Tony. His ball game won't be over yet. This'll only take a minute."



Not much of a peace offering, but at least he'd know she was thinking about him. She squinted to locate the lines of the parking grid on the rain-slick pavement then decided it wasn't worth the eyestrain. The only other vehicle in the lot was a mid-sized car angled just outside the store entrance.

"If they can park that way on a night like this, so can I." She eased to a stop alongside. "Do you need anything, Norma?"

"I might as well get some milk. It'll save me going out tomorrow."

"I'll get it. You stay here and keep dry. This is my crazy idea, remember? What kind do you want?"

Norma's seatbelt clicked open. "I can't stay out here alone. Harry Silver's not the only criminal on the loose."

Ruth held back a sigh. Did Norma think she'd be attacked by someone roaming around in the pouring rain? Kidnapped? "Not even if I lock the doors?"

"Don't fret, Ruth. I'm dressed for it. And Tony will appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"Okay. Let's run for it, then."

The wind sloshed buckets of rain against their backs and pushed them toward the building. Ruth grabbed the door handle with both hands and strained to pull it open against the gale. This was crazy. They should just go home. The blast of wind shifted, and Ruth stumbled backward. Fingers sliding on the wet metal bar, she held it until Norma scurried through then ducked inside. Another gust slammed them in.

The other customer stood with his back to them at the cash. Ruth snatched a bag of sea salt potato chips from the display rack while Norma headed for the dairy case.

“You two get over here. Now!” A man’s voice. Loud. Dangerous.

Ruth clutched the bag of chips to her chest. Her heart rate quickened. A robbery? Be calm. These things were usually for money. As long as the cashier gave the guy what he wanted, they’d be fine.

Don’t make eye contact with him and don’t resist. Ruth willed the teen girl at the cash register to remember her safety training for a hold-up situation.

The door beckoned from maybe three paces behind her, but she couldn’t abandon her friend. Why couldn’t Norma have waited in the car? Ruth darted into the nearest aisle and scooted toward the rear of the store.

“Come out now. Or do you want me to put a bullet in our beautiful cashier?”

Heart pounding, Ruth ventured out the other end of the short aisle. Where was Norma? To her right, the ashen-faced cashier gaped at the man with the gun. The girl pressed against the displays behind the counter as if they were the only things holding her up.

The burglar wasn’t a young kid, but Ruth had guessed as much from his voice. Hopefully that meant he was less inclined to panic. More likely to leave them unhurt? He turned his head in Ruth’s direction, and she looked away. No eye contact.

Norma stood beside the dairy case, wide-eyed and gaping as if she’d seen the grim reaper. Something in her eyes. . .

Ruth turned.

That face.

Ruth’s throat seized. She couldn’t swallow. Couldn’t speak. Couldn’t scream.

Norma scuttled up behind her and grabbed her hand. "It's Harry Silver!"

His mouth twisted in a mocking smile, and he nodded. "Always good to meet a fan."

Ruth couldn't look away.

"Over this way." Harry gestured with the gun. She and Norma inched toward him. They clung together. Norma's sniffles turned to tears.

Tremors rocked Ruth's stomach and bile crowded her throat. She fought to steady her breathing. The news reports said he was still in Canada, but he couldn't be here in Nova Scotia. Not while the manhunt targeted leads in Alberta. How could they have been so wrong?

She blinked hard, but nothing changed.

Harry Silver. Right here in the same room. He'd kill them all.

He had the cashier by the wrist. Young, with long blond hair—the type of girl he always chose. Just like Susan. Ruth's heart tore. This girl couldn't be more than seventeen, just a high-school student. Maybe one of Tony's. She had to recognize Harry Silver. How much did she know about what he did to his victims?

So much for prayer. Tony's voice mocked her. Could he be right?

Harry stepped from behind the counter, gripping the cashier's arm. The gun in his hand targeted Ruth and Norma as they huddled together, then jerked toward the position he'd abandoned. "Back there. Now."

Ruth's muscles weren't working. Her feet dragged as if she were walking underwater against a strong current. Step by step, she shuffled after Norma.

Harry thrust the cashier toward them in the narrow space. She let out a hiccupping cry and pressed her fist against her lips.

Ruth reached out to pull her into a hug, but the girl jerked away from her touch.

He stepped nearer, crowding them, gloating. He probably fed on their terror. One-handed, he swept some cigarettes from the wall display into a plastic bag then threw in the sandwich packets that lay scattered near the cash register.

He picked up a soggy hat and what looked like a fake beard—a disguise?—and flashed them both a smile. “This beautiful young lady has won herself a one-night stand with yours truly. An experience to die for. No witnesses allowed.”

The trembling cashier drew back against the wall, chest heaving, eyes wide. Harry sauntered nearer to her and leveled the gun at the two friends.

They should duck, run, do something. Standing here shivering would get them shot, but Ruth’s feet had rooted to the floor.

Norma clutched her arm, babbling in her ear. “He’s going to kill us, he’s going to kill us. I don’t want to die. Do something—you even prayed for him! Oh, God, he’s going to kill us.” Norma’s whisper hissed on, but the words stopped registering.

The gun’s muzzle wavered.

The blond girl whimpered, and a slow smile spread across Harry’s face. His chin lifted, and he licked his lips. “You’re just what I need.” He raised the gun.

As one, Ruth and Norma bolted around the far end of the counter.

His first shot missed. They ducked behind the nearest shelves, ears ringing from the blast. Ruth ran for the door. "Norma, come on!"

Harry swore.

The cashier screamed.

Before Ruth took another step, the lights went out. She kept moving in the dark, brushing her fingertips along the line of shelves so she wouldn't veer off course and bump into anything.

Almost there. . . *God, help me find a place to hide and call 9-1-1.*

Ruth's gasping breaths echoed off the shelving, made it hard to hear anything else. She and Norma had a head start—they'd reach the exit before the others. Would the cashier hide or run? Harry would hunt her—poor girl! But Ruth and Norma had a chance to get out, to call for help before he claimed another victim.

Footsteps rapped behind her. Norma! Ruth ran faster. They were going to make it.

Fingers brushed hers, snatched her hand. Pulled her toward the bright red exit sign and the faint rectangle of the doorway.

Not Norma's bony grip—a large hand, strong and warm. Harry Silver.

Ruth screamed and tried to pull away. Her free hand swept a line of boxes to the floor, but she couldn't grab anything for an anchor. Harry dragged her from the store.

Her fingertips hooked the doorframe, but his speed tore them free. Fat raindrops stung her face as he hauled her, struggling, toward his car.

Harry flung open the driver's door, shoved her inside, and glared at her in the glow from the car's dome light. He spat a curse. "You!"

Ruth cringed at the hatred in his eyes. Would he let her go? Or shoot her? *God, help me!*

He grabbed her arm as if to pull her from the car, his fingers like hooks. Ruth cried out, and he swore harder. He half-turned toward the store then whirled back to face her. "She'll have called the cops by now. Useless or not, you're my hostage. Get into the passenger seat. Move."

She'd move, all right. Over the center console and out the other door. Crying, gasping, she hitched one leg over the stick shift, then the other. Almost there. Her coat pocket snagged.

Harry piled into the driver's seat. His hand on her shoulder pushed her the rest the way, to the sound of tearing fabric.

Ruth searched for the door latch. She had bare seconds to escape.

Harry jammed the key into the ignition. Ruth's fingers found the handle. As it clicked open, she threw her weight against the door.

The engine caught. Harry seized her arm and yanked her back into the car.

Ruth screamed again. "No, please. Let me go!"

He threw the car into gear and swerved hard. The motion sent her falling against him and slammed the door on her escape.

She pulled away from him as he floored it out of the parking lot, taking the empty suburban streets well above the limit in spite of the rain. How could he see where he was going?

This couldn't be happening. "Please—it's a mistake—you don't want me." Thank God the cashier was safe, but —not her!

Her hand went to the door latch. She could still jump. An image flashed in her mind of hitting the asphalt, breaking bones, then rolling as her skin tore. She willed her fingers to pull the latch but they slid away.

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she slumped against the door. *Lord, where are You?*

"Cell phone. Now." Harry drove left-handed, his right extended for her phone. The bag he stole from the store still dangled from his wrist. He swung his arm backward and the bag slid off into the rear. His hand reached back to Ruth.

She clutched the purse in her lap.

"Now." He grabbed the bag but she held on. Before he could win the tug of war, she tore open the outer flap and pulled out the slim cell.

He released her purse and snatched the phone. Harry switched hands on the wheel and jabbed the automatic window button. Seconds later the cell went spinning into the night. "Throw your purse in the back seat, or it goes out, too."

As if she had anything in it for defense, but it was all she had left. Ruth reached between the seats and made herself release the soft leather bag. Empty hands. Ruth gulped. So alone.

Two deserted streets later Harry took the highway's on-ramp and left Halifax behind. Where was he taking her?

"Please. Let me go. This can't be happening."

"Oh, it's happening, sweetheart." He muttered something about stupid sheep. "You can't be that clueless. Even your friend knows who I am. I can't just shoot you now. You cost me a night of passion. You're going to pay before you die."