

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Prologue

Ruth Warner switched on the lamp in the den, placed a steaming cup of tea on the coffee table and settled into her favorite chair. She tugged her yellow terrycloth robe tighter around her body and picked up her laptop. By the time she finished reading her morning devotional, the tea had cooled enough to sip.

She clicked the bookmark icon to load the local Nova Scotian newspaper into her browser. Mug in one hand, she slid her other index finger across the laptop's touch pad to run the cursor down the column of headlines, bringing up the picture linked with each.

Explosions in the Middle East. Bank CEO Expense Scandal. Atlantic Canada Digs Out After Freak April Blizzard. Markets Down Again. Ruth grimaced. The snow was already melting. If only the economy would turn around as quickly. In their mid-forties, she and her husband needed their retirement investments to grow, not shrink.

Ruth's cursor reached the next headline.

Black Flagged. The accompanying photo showed a smiling, handsome, dark-haired man. Harry Silver, champion auto racing driver.

Frowning, Ruth took another sip of tea. Her husband Tony was one of Silver's biggest fans. She'd picked up enough of the jargon over the years to know that 'black flagged' meant 'disqualified, out of the race.'

Was this about Silver's suspension following the accident?

No. That was old news. This had to be something more. Ruth put her mug on the coffee table and clicked the headline link. She angled the laptop screen for a better view. It shook in her hand as she paged down to take in more of the horror.

The serial rapist-murder that Canadian and US authorities had been hunting—could it really be Harry Silver? She read the article again from the top, then did an internet search for his name to see what other sites had to say.

The background hiss of Tony's shower cut out.

Sweat prickled the back of Ruth's neck despite the morning chill. The metallic taste of blood tainted her saliva and she realized she'd bitten down on the inside of her cheek. She swallowed hard.

How could she tell Tony? He practically idolized Harry Silver. The man's arrest would be hard enough, but for Tony's hero to be the one who'd murdered their niece ...

The bathroom door opened, and Tony padded down the hallway to their room. Ruth waited a few minutes to give him time to dress, then put down her laptop, turned out the reading lamp and followed him into the bedroom.

When his eyes met hers in the mirror, he left his tie half knotted and turned to face her. "Hey, are you okay?"

Ruth pressed her palms into the rough terrycloth of her robe. "Harry Silver."

Tony's brow puckered. "Now what?"

"I can't—Tony, I'm sorry—" She darted across the room and dug under Tony's pillow for the TV remote. He should hear it from her, not from some stranger, but she couldn't speak the words.

She jabbed the remote's power button and selected Canada's national news channel. The television flashed to a news anchor in a power suit, mid-way through a sentence. "—caught in the act of abducting a young woman

in Toronto. He has been charged in the death of Susan Elaine Parker in the same city, and police say more charges are pending."

Tony sank onto the edge of the bed. His face paled, took on a gray tint as if he might faint. Ruth touched his shoulder but he ignored her, staring slack-jawed at the screen.

She sat beside him, their thighs touching, and reached for his hand.

The newscaster kept talking. "Harry Silver is the reigning champion driver of the most prestigious auto racing circuit in North America. A Canadian hero has fallen hard, and racing fans are not the only ones to feel a sense of betrayal."

His voice droned on and Ruth lowered the volume. They'd heard all they needed to know about Harry Silver's history. The television flashed a wide-screen shot of a blue race car hitting the track wall while a voice-over highlighted the popular driver's rise to fame—and sudden fall.

Tony shuddered. Red crept into his pallor, and his lips tightened.

Ruth pressed her knee against his leg. "Swear if you have to. Whatever you say about him, you know I won't argue."

He shook his head in slow denial. "This is a bad joke."

She squeezed his hand. "I did an internet search before coming in here. CNN's carrying it too, but I wanted the Canadian news feed. Tony, I'm so sorry."

Tony's shoulders lifted and he seemed to gather his strength. He turned to Ruth and stroked her cheek with his free hand. "I'll be all right. How are you feeling?"

Anger simmered in Ruth's chest, but she didn't want to vent at Tony. She pulled in a shaky breath. "He killed Susan. Now I have a name and a face to hate."

"What about 'innocent until proven guilty'?"

"You heard the news guy. 'The suspect didn't refute the charges.'"

"He's probably still shopping for a lawyer."

Tears blurred her vision. "He's guilty—guilty as sin—you heard them say he was in the area when each of those young women was killed. I hope one of them was from a state with the death penalty. The Americans can extradite him."

"He's a Canadian citizen, and most of the victims were murdered in Canada. Death penalty's not an option."

"We could disown him." Ruth glared at the smiling, dark-haired racing star on the television. Betrayal, the news anchor had said. Maybe that explained the hollow ache beneath her anger. "Look at him. Successful, healthy, perfect. He had it all, he didn't have to do this."

"Babe, nobody had to do this."

"You know what I mean. He was—we cheered for him, admired him. And he did such horrible things to those innocent women. To Su—to Susan."

Tony let go of her hand and drew her into a hug. Ruth leaned against him, remembering. Their niece had been missing for six weeks before hikers found her mutilated body and police marked one more victim against the elusive serial killer. That was two months ago now, and the pain still twisted like a torturer's blade.

An arrest should have helped, *would* have helped if it had been an anonymous stranger. This had to be hitting Tony harder than her. She was the one with the faith, and she was a mess. How did he stay so strong?

His arms tightened around her, then released. "Don't let this eat you up. He's not worth it. Come on, we'd better get ready for work."

Ruth glanced at the bedside clock and jumped to her feet. They should be finishing breakfast, and she wasn't even dressed yet. Not that she could eat after this news.

She flung open the closet door and grabbed a clean shirt and pants. How could she face the customers at work today when Harry Silver had her thoughts and emotions in such turmoil? But if she took a sick day, she'd drown in this mess.

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Ruth finished loading the supper dishes into the dishwasher and gave Tony a quick kiss before he headed downstairs to his workshop. She made her way to the den, dropped into one of the twin blue recliners, and popped the footrest. Her laptop lay on the table by the chair, and she slid it onto her legs.

In the early days of her grief for Susan, Ruth had consumed everything she could find online about the search for the serial killer who'd destroyed so many lives. Tony called it an obsession, but she had to know.

Harry Silver's arrest solved that mystery, but she and Tony kept this evening routine, him with his carving, her with the internet. For her now, it wasn't about *who* but *how*. And *why*. And *when* this monster would face trial.

Ruth's browser loaded the search page, and she typed 'Harry Silver'. Most of the links came up purple to show she'd already clicked them, but the top three were new. Bracing herself, she clicked the top link: *Inside the Mind of a Sexual Predator*.

Why did she do this to herself? Reading the speculations about why Silver had tortured his victims was almost as traumatic as reading about what he'd done to them. But Susan had lived through it—died because of it. Alone. If Ruth could somehow share a bit of the pain, maybe it would ... what?

This writer had a string of abbreviated degrees after his name, which was no guarantee of wisdom. At least he wrote at a layperson's reading level she could understand. Ruth forced herself to take in every word.

A cough from the doorway made her jump. She glanced up at Tony, who stood leaning a shoulder against the door frame.

He lifted his other shoulder. "Sorry. I thought you'd have heard me come upstairs."

He stepped closer to her chair. "How about we go for a coffee?"

"In a bit." Ruth scanned the rest of the profile. The analyst had drawn a chilling picture of a sexual predator's mind. Was this how the creep thought? No punishment could be harsh enough for what Susan and his other victims had suffered. She hit the browser's 'back' arrow and then opened the next article.

Tony squeezed her shoulder. "You must know more about Harry Silver than his own family by now. What are you looking for?"

She half turned to look up at him. "I thought an arrest would make things better."

"I know." He pulled the laptop from her knees.

"Hey." She tried to get it back, but he held it out of reach and snapped it shut.

He set it on the table, caught her hand and gave a gentle tug. "Break time."

Grumbling inside, Ruth followed him to the car. So maybe his carving wasn't going so well tonight and he needed a break. She got that. Maybe they both needed a break. But hijacking her in the middle of her research wasn't fair. And coffee wouldn't drown the anger that sat like a venomous toad in her stomach.

Tony slid an instrumental jazz CD into the player. Ruth closed her eyes and leaned against the headrest, letting the music wash over her. She blew out a slow breath. Tony deserved better than this. She didn't like herself this way. Tony couldn't either, although he'd been more patient than she had a right to expect. She had to get a grip.

Harry Silver had stolen their niece's life. She couldn't change that. Why had she let him damage her heart and her marriage?

The car's motion helped her relax, and she kept her eyes shut, praying for peace instead of this constant anger. The turn indicator clicked, Tony slowed, and he brought them to a stop.

Okay, Lord, I can't do this on my own. Help me be what Tony needs right now. Ruth opened her eyes and saw spindly trees edging the parking lot, not the glass walls of the local Tim Hortons.

Her head whipped around. Through Tony's window she saw her church, with another car parked outside.

Tony flashed her a tight-lipped grin. "Didn't think I knew the way?"

He pulled the key from the ignition and reached for the door handle.

Ruth clutched his arm. "Wait a minute. What's going on?"

"Going on?" He raised one eyebrow behind his glasses. "Are we in the middle of a conspiracy theory, then?"

He peeled her fingers from his arm and got out of the car. "Look, I'm worried about you, okay? You wouldn't go to that grief counselor I found, but we both know you need help. Your pastor's had some counseling training along with the theology. Maybe he can do something."

"You didn't go to the grief counselor either."

Tony held her gaze and took a slow breath. "I'm working through my grief on my own. Yours needs a little help."

He walked around the car and opened her door. The lights of the parking lot turned his sandy hair to silver as he stood there, hand outstretched, the picture of patience. "He's expecting us in his office. It would be more comfortable than meeting out here."

What had she just prayed for? Peace and to treat Tony better. Ruth clenched her teeth to keep back words she'd regret. She couldn't make herself take his hand, though. Instead she marched beside him into the building, guiding him to the office without a word.

Pastor John Linton welcomed them and held out his hand to Tony. "Thanks for coming. It's good to meet you and put a face to your voice."

He filled mismatched ceramic mugs with coffee from the carafe on his filing cabinet. Tony stirred cream and sugar into one and handed it to Ruth.

Tony took his own coffee and eased his bulky frame into the nearest overstuffed black armchair. He raised an eyebrow at Ruth, still standing in the doorway. Stiff-legged, she brushed past him and took a seat in the matching chair beside him, careful not to let her knees brush his. The upholstery closed in around her, anchoring her in the chair. And there sat Tony like a sentry between her and the door.

Ruth ran a hand through her hair. Tony didn't do church, ever. For him to contact her pastor and bring her to see him—her husband must be really worried. The sight of him sitting beside her, fidgeting with his watch strap, sparked a flicker of warmth. He loved her so much. And he tried to take care of her. Only this time there was nothing he—or anybody—could do. The sooner he came to terms with that, the better for them all.

She looked across the desk at John Linton and the warmth died. The pastor was young, in his early thirties, his thin face scarred from adolescent acne. His pale eyes, usually so mild, probed hers.

"Ruth, Tony asked me if we could meet to talk about your anger. I know you've both experienced a tragic loss, but I didn't realize things were this bad."

"Aren't I allowed to grieve?" Ruth spoke past a jagged lump in her throat. The coffee mug shook in her hand and she concentrated on setting it safely on the edge of the desk.

"This is beyond grief. It's poisoning you." Something in the pastor's voice made Ruth look up. A sad sort of yearning filled his eyes.

Ruth's fingernails dug into the padded arm of her chair. He had all the answers, did he? Even for the question that burned a hole in her heart? "Where was God? Why didn't He do something to help her?"

She buried her face in her hands. Tony sprang from his chair and wrapped his arms around her. Sobbing, she leaned into his embrace.

"I've wondered about that too, Pastor, but I suspect I answered it differently than you will." Tony's flat tone held a challenge.

He pulled a tissue from the box on the desk and pressed it into Ruth's hand. She hunched over, soothed by his fingers stroking her spine, but unable to speak. Once she quieted, he planted a kiss on her hair and stepped back to his seat. Without the protective circle of his arms, Ruth felt cold, defenseless. He rested a hand on her arm. Had he seen her shiver?

Ruth took a slow, quivering breath and blotted her tears. She reached for her coffee, as if holding something would give her the strength she needed, and forced herself to meet her pastor's eyes. "I'm angry with God. I know it's wrong, but I can't help it."

Pastor Linton's expression held no rebuke, just patient invitation. "Questions are a natural part of life, Ruth. Let's talk about yours."

Questions and accusations. Ruth had hurled them at God so many times lately. If God wouldn't answer, what did a pastor have to offer? The words boiled up anyway and she couldn't keep them in. "Susan would have prayed for help until her last breath. Why didn't God do something?"

John Linton closed his eyes for a moment. "I don't know. And I wouldn't presume to explain God's decisions for Him, but I do have an idea."

He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "I don't think you're going to like it, though."

Ruth squeezed her mug with both hands and concentrated on the warmth against her palms. The coffee rippled. "What is it?"

"God could have saved Susan, but He didn't. Therefore, I believe He has a purpose in this, even though we can't see what it is. He was right there with her through it all. And He welcomed her into His arms at the end."

Tears glistened in his eyes, but he didn't seem to notice. He stared at Ruth with an intensity that caught her breath. "While you're fighting what's happened, you're not open to pray for God's purposes to be accomplished. A lot more depends on prayer than we realize." He paused. "You can pray for Susan's family and friends, her co-workers, the hikers who found her body, and even for Harry Silver."

Ruth choked. "How can you ask me to pray for that—that monster—after what he did?" She pulled in a deep breath. "There are limits."

"Are they God's limits or your own?"

Tony whistled under his breath. Ruth shot him a glare. Whose side was he on, anyway?

Pastor Linton cleared his throat. "Ruth, does God want anyone to perish?"

Ruth scuffed the carpet with her toe. "No."

"How many people do you suppose are praying for Harry Silver right now?"

"I don't know." Probably none.

Tony snorted. "Who'd waste their breath?"

Pale grey eyes held Ruth's. "Somebody'd better pray for him, don't you think? He is a lost soul."

She broke away from his gaze. "Let him stay lost. He deserves it."

"As do we all."

Ruth wanted to deny his words, to shout the impossibility of what he asked. She couldn't think of Harry Silver being prayed for, being saved. Escaping judgment. The pressure inside her grew until she could hear her heartbeat. Her face burned.

"No. I won't pray for him. But I'll pray for the others."

"That's a good start." The pastor pulled a yellow sticky note from a plastic dispenser, wrote a few lines and handed it across his desk. "Take two of these, and call me in the morning." He grinned. "Seriously, these are some Scriptures you can read when you pray. The healing will be slow, but it will come. Give God time. And I'm just on the other end of the phone if you need to talk."

"Thank you." Ruth looked at her husband. "Both of you."

Tony gave her a slow smile. He'd be thinking John had only offered her a crutch, a placebo, but he'd also be hoping it would work.

Ruth smiled back and felt her tension ease the smallest bit. Right now she needed a crutch—needed two. And she knew prayer was no sugar pill.

Hope lightened her bones. So many people were hurt by this monster, and she'd let herself feel like the only one. John was right. Praying for the others would help her too.

But as for the rest of her pastor's words ... A steel certainty lodged in her heart. She would never pray for Harry Silver.

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Janet Sketchley is a Canadian author with a passion for story. She's also a wife, mom, daughter, and friend, balancing relationships and responsibilities while learning how faith applies to real life. Combine all that with her quirky imagination to get inspiring novels about everyday women in suspenseful situations, who discover more strength within than they could have dreamed.

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