

Secrets and Lies

REDEMPTION'S EDGE
BOOK TWO
CHAPTER 1

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Chapter 1

Carol jolted upright, eyes wide in the dark. She searched for familiar touchstones to pull her back to reality. The faint light outlining her bedroom curtains. The red digits on her clock radio, mocking her with the hours left until dawn. The two dark rectangles on her bureau — Paul’s and Keith’s school photos.

Her hands ached. It took a conscious act of will to release her two-fisted grip on the sheets.

Paul.

The afterimages of Carol’s dream burned in her imagination. Her sixteen-year-old son, larger than life on a brightly-lit stage, arms raised to embrace the crowd’s cheers, electric guitar draped low across his hips. An oversized brown leather jacket hung open over his faded T-shirt and jeans.

Carol knew that jacket. Butter-soft Italian calfskin, steeped in beer and Old Spice, nicked and scraped here and there and with a cigarette burn inside the left cuff.

Skip’s jacket. Paul’s father’s.

In her dream she’d stood beside her son, but Paul only had eyes for his fans. An almost palpable energy radiated from his body — the same power trip that took Skip whenever he performed. With the same cost to those who loved him.

The cheering swelled. Paul swung his guitar in a move that knocked Carol off the stage.

She'd awakened from a panicked sense of free-fall. Her heart slowed, each beat heavy, sodden. Hopeless.

Carol pushed sweaty bangs off her forehead. Breathe. Slowly. Deeply. Dreams died in the waking.

The dog stood like a shadow at her bedside. He gave another low whine and licked her arm.

"I'm okay, Chance."

She rolled over, buried her face in his shaggy fur. The scene played again in her mind. Carol shivered and tightened her hold on the dog, anchoring in his comforting scent.

After a minute she released Chance and slid out of bed, into floppy slippers and her old robe. She peered through a crack in the curtains. The street lay deserted.

In the short hallway, Carol pressed her fingertips against Paul's door. Light snores reached her through the wood. Her firstborn... and the only one left to her since they'd lost his brother, Keith.

Carol fled for the kitchen, Chance at her heels. She flicked on the overhead light and turned on the radio to the all-night request show. "Lookin' Out My Back Door?" An unusual pick for the middle of the night, but the whimsical song tugged Carol's lips into a smile.

At least the bright tempo swept away the final shards of her dream. Carol grabbed the kettle and splashed in enough water for tea. She had not moved halfway across the country to fall apart. This was a fresh start for her and Paul. Safe, anonymous, positive.

She plugged in the kettle and snagged the wall phone. Her call went through on the third try. Lucky this time, for a change.

"Welcome to All-Request Oldies. What would you like to hear tonight?" On the radio, the music kept playing.

“Hi, Joey. It’s Carol.” She stretched the phone cord to reach the counter and poured boiling water into a blue-flowered porcelain cup.

“Carol!” He always sounded glad she called, as if she were a friend he hadn’t heard from in years instead of a stranger who phoned a few times a week. Part of the job, but he did it well. “What’re you up to at this hour of the morning?”

Carol dipped the teabag in her cup, turning the water amber-gold. The scent of peppermint teased her nostrils. “Making myself some tea.” She kept her tone light. “Some nights I sleep better than others.”

“I held off on playing Billy Joel in case you phoned.”

She padded across the room, careful not to spill her tea. “Am I that predictable?”

“Hey, I said ‘in case.’ One sec. Song’s over. Don’t go.” Click. The hiss of dead air meant he’d parked the call and un-muted his station mic.

Carol muffled a sigh and slid one of the chairs away from the table. Half-listening to Joey’s voice on the radio with the next line-up of songs, she sank onto the neatly taped vinyl and eased her feet up onto its mate. Chance rested his muzzle on her leg.

When the Beatles started singing “Blackbird,” Joey’s rich baritone came back on the phone. “Carol? You still with me?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“You’ve got work to do.” The dream sounded silly now. Joey understood the usual ones of Paul in danger, but how could she explain why a band dream left her more cold, more... desolate... and still feeling aftershocks?

“I just bought us twelve minutes, so shoot.”

Carol touched the cup's rim to her lips. Hot, but not painful. The spicy tea set her mouth tingling. "My son was playing in a band. Dressed like his father."

"His father's dead, isn't he? Are you afraid it's some kind of warning?"

"No — well, not about death this time. Maybe this is worse, because it's more likely to come true." The words froze Carol's lips. "The boys never knew how big a rat Skip was. Paul built him into some kind of musical legend."

Her fingertip connected the chips in the faded tabletop. "I shouldn't have called, I can't even think of a song to request."

"No worries. I know what you like by now. What kind of tea are you drinking?"

"Hmm? Oh, peppermint. It smells like freedom."

"Freedom's good. Tell you what, I'll wait fifteen minutes or so and play something to send you better dreams."

"Thanks, Joey. It's been good to hear a friendly voice."

"Trust me. You'll make it. I'll say a little prayer for you."

Ever since the first night in Toronto, when she'd found his show after a nightmare-fractured sleep, Joey'd been saying things would work out. So far he was right.

She'd barely hung up the phone when doubt kicked in. She'd said too much, shouldn't have mentioned Skip's name, or that he'd been a musician. Joey only knew her as Carol. No last name. With the extra details, he could find out who she was. Fear tiptoed along her spine.

If word leaked that she'd moved to Toronto, and if the note-sending psycho from Calgary heard...

She looked down at the dog, asleep on the floor. Worst-case, what if the guy came looking for them? With over six million people in the Greater Toronto Area, only blind luck would let him find them.

Still, she shouldn't have let down her defences. From now on, she'd be more careful. Carol swallowed the last of her tea, rinsed her mug and headed back to bed.

Warm but awake, she turned on her bedside radio and tried to drift away on the music. Before long, Joey announced, "This next one's for Carol. Sleep well."

The haunting first notes of Billy Joel's "Through the Long Night" washed the tension from her muscles and she smiled in the darkness. Her coping mechanisms might be odd, but they were safer than prayer.

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