

Without Proof

REDEMPTION'S EDGE
BOOK THREE

BONUS: CHRISTMAS PROLOGUE

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JANET SKETCHLEY
www.janetsketchley.ca

DECEMBER, TWO YEARS EARLIER

Prologue

ONE OF AMY'S spun glass Christmas angels twisted on its golden thread, sparkling in the tree lights. Of the original six, five remained, treasured links to her childhood.

Michael and his great-aunt had invited her to add a few ornaments to the bushy spruce he'd brought home this afternoon. Another thoughtful gesture in a string of kindnesses they'd shown her since the plane crash.

Amy inhaled the pungent sharpness of a real tree. She'd had a tabletop artificial one when she lived alone, and in the excitement of wedding plans, she and Gilles hadn't thought ahead to Christmas.

Now it was moot. Amy's fiancé lay in a frozen cemetery while she took refuge with his best friend.

Her injuries were healing. Her heart, not so much.

Amy adjusted the recliner's footrest and repositioned the cold pack against her hip. She hadn't helped much with the decorating, but clearly she'd overdone something.

Aunt Bay stepped back into the room carrying two china

mugs. She set one on the table at Amy's elbow and carried the other to her seat. "Tired?"

"A little. Thanks for the tea."

"Orange spice. It's a good Christmas tea." Aunt Bay didn't look any more filled with seasonal joy than Amy felt. Bare months since the tragedy, all three of them were still grieving, but Michael and his aunt claimed Christmas mattered more than ever in the middle of pain.

Amy picked up her tea and breathed the warm spices. The first sip was bitter, but her taste buds adjusted quickly.

Aunt Bay put on some quiet, instrumental carols. "There's a candlelight concert at church this evening. You haven't been anywhere other than appointments. Come with us?"

Amy's chest tightened. "Thanks, but you know I don't do church."

"Christmas brings a lot of visitors who won't come other times."

"Let's just say God doesn't want me in His house."

Aunt Bay's delicate eyebrows arched. "Why would you think that?"

Heat prickled Amy's hairline. "I'm an outsider."

"We're all outsiders, until He brings us in."

Amy stared at the tree. "You and Michael go."

"Child, you're no better and no worse than the rest of the planet. That's the point of Christmas: Nobody's good enough to reach God, so God came to reach us. No matter who we've been or what we've done."

"Please — I can't—" Amy's voice shook.

Aunt Bay studied her. "God does care. He'll show you, but

you'll need to keep your eyes open to see it." She smiled. "I can almost guarantee it won't be what you'd expect."

Holding her tea in both hands, Amy concentrated on the heat against her palms. With her heart in tatters, she didn't dare think about the other longings in her life.

The music seemed suddenly louder. *Joy to the World*. Amy set her mug on the table and rammed the footrest back into place. Any more cheer and she might explode.

She grasped her cane and levered herself to her feet. Before she took a step, her cell phone rang. Amy seized the excuse to leave the room. "Excuse me."

Call display showed *L. Renaud*. The man who should have been her father-in-law. Amy pressed the phone to her ear. "Hello?" She kept walking.

"Amy, it's Luc. Are you free this evening? Could I see you?" Tension threaded his voice, or perhaps it was the connection.

"Of course. Is everything all right?"

"I just picked up a rental car at the airport. Expect me in about forty-five minutes." He disconnected.

What now? Amy shoved the phone back into her pocket.

She couldn't face more Christmas music, not even to retrieve her mug. Instead, she limped into the kitchen. Not bothering with a light, Amy stared out the window at the darkness. She was stronger now. If Luc wanted more trouble, he wouldn't find her so easy to push around. Not that he'd done the pushing. He'd left that to his wife.

Footsteps sounded behind her, and a light flicked on. "Amy?" Michael's voice, gentle, tentative.

She pivoted on her cane.

He'd changed out of his work clothes, ready for the evening out. One hand stretched toward her. "Aunt Bay said she upset you."

Amy shrugged. "She didn't mean to."

"That doesn't make it better." Michael stepped nearer. "You don't mind being here by yourself tonight, do you?"

If only. "Luc just phoned. He's in town again and wants to come by."

His brows pulled together. "Do you want me to stay?"

"Go enjoy your concert. I don't expect him to be here long."

Michael's slow scrutiny seemed to satisfy his concern. "Say hello for me. And enjoy your space."

"I will."

When they left, Amy plugged her phone into the speaker dock and switched to mellow jazz. Anything but happy-peppy seasonal sounds.

Before long, engine vibrations indicated Luc's arrival. Amy met him at the door.

Gilles' father wore his grief etched in his face. He seemed smaller somehow, as if he were shrinking inside. He stood on the doorstep, shoulders hunched, and offered a smile. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm making progress. My therapist says I'll be able to lose the cane eventually." Trying her hardest not to limp, Amy led him into the living room and took a seat.

Luc walked to inspect the Christmas tree before turning to face her. "I arranged a meeting in Halifax tomorrow morning, to have an excuse to be here. My wife — Amy, I'm sorry." He reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope. His hand

shook as he passed it to her.

What had Honore done now? The envelope was too small to be a legal document or other official paperwork. Holding her breath, Amy slit the seal and peeked inside.

A curve of metal lay tucked into one corner. Amy gasped. “My engagement ring!” Her fingertips caressed it, ached to return it to her hand. But those days were over.

Luc’s face darkened. “I found it in the safe at home. I swear, I didn’t know she had it.”

Amy pinned him with her eyes. “The hospital staff gave Honore my jewellery for safekeeping. When she cleared all my things out of Gilles’ apartment, she threw everything together in a mess and accused me of losing my ring in the bags.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. I was — lost.” Luc wiped a hand across his face. He still looked lost.

Amy’s heart twinged a tiny bit. Not enough to excuse him. “We were all devastated. At least you had the rest of your family. I had no one.” Not that she’d wanted Honore’s help.

Luc’s sigh bordered on a moan. “Michael and his aunt are good people. They’ll help you until you’re ready to resume your career. I have nothing to offer you. I wish things could have been different.” He walked to the door.

Amy pushed to her feet and followed him. “Luc? Thank you for my ring. For coming in person with it.”

He didn’t turn. “Goodbye, Amy. Stay safe.”

The door opened, and he went out into the night.

Amy locked up behind him and climbed the stairs to her bedroom. She pulled the ring from its envelope and pressed the diamond to her lips.

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She had so few connections to Gilles. A handful of photos on her phone, and one or two gifts that his mother hadn't realized came from him. Honore had taken everything else.

This ring couldn't bring him back, but it proved he'd loved her.

She opened her jewellery box and found a thin gold chain to hold her treasure. When she slipped the chain over her head and felt the weight of the ring against her chest, a shiver swept Amy's shoulders.

Her mind replayed Aunt Bay's words. *It won't be what you'd expect.*

Amy narrowed her eyes at her reflection in the mirror. This couldn't be a sign of God's care.

There wouldn't be a sign. Not for her.

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