Heaven's Prey

Redemption's Edge
Book One

Expanded Anniversary Edition

Prologue and Chapter 1

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"It makes no difference to God's grace what an abomination I am, if I will only come to the light. But 'Woe is me' if I refuse the light (see John 3:19-21)."

~Oswald Chambers, in *My Utmost for His Highest®*.

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The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

"To God Be the Glory," lyrics by Fanny Crosby, 1820-1915 (public domain)

Content Advisory

This novel is about the redemption of a serial rapist-murderer and contains content that may be triggering if you have experienced, or have a strong fear of, sexual violence.

That said, I've done my best to make it a clean read. There's no nudity or profanity, and his attacks occur off-page with a small amount of "before" and "after."

If you're at all unsure about proceeding, I encourage you to ask a trusted friend to read the book first so they can tell you if it's safe for you.

My goal is to celebrate a God whose saving love doesn't write off even the vilest offenders—not to add more trauma to readers' lives! God bless and keep you, protect and encourage you, and draw you to rejoice in His goodness and light.

~Janet Sketchley
November, 2023

Prologue

NO ONE IN his right mind would choose this twisty, unlit highway for a fast getaway, especially in a storm like this.

At least that's what the man at the wheel hoped the cops would think.

A gust of wind slammed the compact sedan sideways on the wet pavement. His passenger screamed. He swerved back into his lane with enough force to throw her against the door. Theatrics, but it served her right.

"Hang on, sweetheart. I won't kill you. Yet."

He squinted past the wild slap-slap of the wipers at the blurred lane markings. A headache hovered behind his eyes, and he spared one hand from the wheel to knead the base of his neck.

Two years since he'd been in the driver's seat. His reaction time had slipped, but not his skill.

The headlights reflected white off a curtain of rain. He kept a steady pressure on the gas, ignoring the pale ghosts of speed limit signs that rose out of the night. Speeding infractions were nothing after what he'd done—and would do again.

This was liberty. Not his escape from prison, but this. Speed. Control, even under these conditions. The rush. The edge that made him master of the best tracks in North

America, from the legendary Indianapolis Brickyard to the street circuit of his home race in Toronto.

He sat taller, shoulders pressed into the seat to stretch his muscles. Look at him now, on a third-rate highway on the back side of nowhere, driving a gutless tub. And grateful to hold a steering wheel.

One last race, such as it was. There should be one last celebratory victim. Acid washed his gut. The girl at the store had been perfect. A mouth-watering blonde in her late teens. Pure looking, maybe even a virgin.

Instead, fate threw him this middle-aged sheep. Too old, wrong hair. Dull.

He hated his plans being thwarted. Hated her for occupying the passenger seat. He'd find a way to make this work. Make her pay for his loss.

The road flattened at the base of another hill and he hit the gas. These East Coast Canadian highways didn't deserve the name. This one had a single lane in each direction. Sometimes a passing lane in the middle.

Good thing there was no one in his way tonight.

Out of the darkness, the lane markings hooked a sharp left. He lifted his foot, hands tight on the wheel. The car hydroplaned straight for the pavement's edge. The headlights shone over an inky drop. No guardrail.

Cold swept his body. Then a wave of blistering heat. He swore. If they went off here—

Teeth clenched, he eased onto the brake. The pedal shuddered as the anti-lock system kicked in. *Give me something, anything.*

Sliding for the brink, the car jerked. Rubber bit asphalt. He reversed away from the edge, shifted into drive, and crept forward in a shallow turn. One tire slid on the painted pavement markings. The car spun and skidded backward.

He sucked air and stood on the brake.

His captive screamed again, a long thin note that broke off as they hit the road's gravel shoulder. The rear wheels slithered, then caught.

Car and body once more under control, he let out a long, low whistle. It wasn't the first time he'd come out lucky.

The woman dropped her hands from her face. Relieved they hadn't crashed? Or disappointed?

"You're not getting out of it that easy. We finish this my way."

The wheels grabbed traction, and he nudged the gas. The car slewed onto the pavement, tires spitting gravel.

His captive slumped in her seat. "God, help me!" The hammering rain nearly overpowered her words.

He glared at the black road ahead. "Don't waste your breath. If there is a God, He didn't help any of the others."

Muscle memory clenched his hands on the steering wheel. "Especially the last one."

Chapter 1

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada—two and a half years earlier

"YOU BOUGHT STRAWBERRIES? In February?"

At her husband's surprised tone, Ruth Warner half-turned from the stove. One hand continued to swirl her wooden spoon through the chocolate fondue sauce. "Don't ask how much I paid, okay?"

A chill wind moaned around the corner of their suburban bungalow, etching frost ferns on the window. The kitchen lights reflected off the honey oak cupboards like afternoon sunlight, though the sun was long gone.

Tony plopped the packet of California strawberries onto the counter and unpacked the rest of the bag. Bananas. Long-stemmed cherries. Last came a pineapple. When he set it on the counter, it wobbled over onto one side. He stood it up, then looked at her. One eyebrow rose behind his wire-rimmed glasses. "What's up?"

"You're the one who said we had to quit moping around waiting for the phone to ring." Ruth watched the bubbles multiplying in the glossy brown sauce, tumbling over one another until the whole mass seethed up the sides of the pot. Like her fears for her missing niece, how they'd grown until she thought they'd swallow her whole.

She reduced the heat and kept stirring.

She'd dreamt about Susan again last night. But instead of jolting awake in the dark, crying and clammy with sweat, she opened her eyes at dawn with a sense of hope.

Now, after a full day's work, the feeling persisted.

Tony stood at the sink, rinsing the cherries and strawberries in the colander. His shoulders drooped, these days.

If her dream had meaning, how could she make him see it?

Ruth inhaled the chocolate-rich steam. She could breathe again, really breathe. The fear that had bound her lungs had gone. In its place welled an expansive peace. She felt, not like a forty-four year old woman trapped on the precipice of grief, but like a child. Like summers, growing up, when a meadow full of daisies beckoned to her through the back door.

Another slow, luxurious breath. She had danced in that meadow.

She glanced sideways at Tony. His knife clunked against the cutting board in a steady rhythm, slicing the pineapple into spears.

Their twenty-three-year-old niece had been gone for a month now with no clue, no contact. Ruth bit her lip. Common sense told her to leave good dreams behind with the bad. Hope whispered, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

Faith first. Maybe the proof of this promise would only come after she believed it.

She watched Tony pile banana chunks in the middle of the fruit tray. If she was wrong, he'd think she was wrong about God in general. Then again, he already did. What if this was God's way of convincing him? Were the big steps always this way? Part guess? She squared her shoulders. Believe it and speak it. "Tony?"

"Mmm?"

"I have something to tell you, and I don't want you to laugh."

"You want to get a rosebud tattoo. Somewhere personal." His sandy eyebrows wiggled.

Ruth flipped a pot holder at him. He ducked but it caught him in the side of the head. "No, I mean it."

He leaned against the counter. The overhead light showed lines that hadn't creased his face a month ago. New strands of grey glistened in his beard.

Her lungs constricted again. "I had this dream last night. About Susan."

His smile fled. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"No, it was a good dream. I saw her walking in a beautiful garden. In a long white gown. She seemed so happy."

Tony's frown deepened but she pressed on. "I'm sure there was a man with her, but I couldn't see him."

"Babe…"

"I know. Dreams don't count for much." She pushed the fringe of hair off her forehead. "Unless God sends them."

Tony folded his arms. "You think it was some kind of vision?"

"Maybe."

He stepped closer and rested his hands on her shoulders, tracing the curve of her collar bone with his thumbs. "Don't you think it might have been your subconscious, showing you what you wanted to see?"

"Why do you have to be such a skeptic?" Ruth jerked away from him. Her elbow caught the wooden spoon and shot it from the saucepan. Dollops of chocolate splattered the front of the stove and the floor.

She grabbed a cleaning rag from the cupboard, wet it, and knelt to wipe up the mess. If only she could wipe away her angry words.

Tony tossed the spoon into the sink, then crouched beside her and cleaned a long trickle of sauce off the oven door.

His index finger slid along the line of her jaw, gently tipping her chin.

Heat flooded her cheeks, and Ruth knew he read her tangled emotions as clearly as if she'd spoken them. "I'm sorry," she whispered. She rinsed the rag and attacked the floor again before standing to wash her hands. "I wish I knew how to make you understand."

The lines deepened around Tony's eyes. "It's time to face reality. She's not coming home. When a young woman disappears with no trace—" He clamped his lips together.

"I know. But if God says Susan's okay, then somehow she's okay. I choose to believe Him."

"You've had bad dreams too."

"This is different. And not because I want it to be. It feels right. What if—" Her words snagged, then tumbled out in a rush. "What if Susan lost her memory and wandered off? Maybe she's a Jane Doe in a hospital."

Tony wrung out the dish cloth and draped it over the faucet. "That only happens in cheap romances."

"Says who? My dream had meaning. I know it did." Ruth yanked a clean spoon from the utensil holder and whirled it through the thickened sauce.

The phone rang. Ruth had tensed at every call since Susan disappeared. Now, hope balanced the fear of what she might hear.

Tony picked up, and she held her breath. Good news—from the police or even Susan herself—could be the answer

to her prayers. The miracle that ended this nightmare. That brought her husband to faith.

"Hello?" Brows drawn tight, he leaned into the receiver, his lips a thin line. Listening. "I'll tell Ruth. I'm so sorry." He fumbled the phone into its cradle.

Hope slipped from Ruth's heart. "Tell me what?"

"That was Lorna." Tears shone in his eyes. His voice creaked like an ancient tree in the wind. He took her hands. "Toronto police have recovered Susan's body. It's over."

"But—"

A vein throbbed in the middle of his forehead. He spoke slowly and clearly as if to a child. "Lorna and Alden had to identify the body. Hair, clothes, everything match but there was no ID on her. Lorna said she was badly beaten. Probably raped."

Ruth's lungs emptied. Her ribs heaved. Strained. At last, her throat opened and sweet air flooded in. She choked on it.

Tony pulled her close.

She pressed her cheek into the scratchy green warmth of his sweater, seizing the muffled rhythm of his heartbeat as an anchor.

Disconnected images swirled in her mind. Susan as a golden-haired six-year-old in a blue flannel nightgown with white kittens on it, glowing with excitement over her first sleepover with Auntie Ruth and Uncle Tony. Susan the poised young woman crossing the stage to accept her nursing diploma. The frayed teddy bear she'd taken with her to Toronto.

Frantic questions rang in a mental voice-over to the memory collage. *What about my dream? God, where were You? Or couldn't You do anything after all?*

Tony's breath warmed her hair. In the midst of the blackness, she blessed this man who never said, "I told you

so." She wrapped both arms around his thick waist and held on.

He guided her into the living room, and they sank onto the couch.

Pressed into his side, Ruth felt cold and alone. Her stomach had turned to slush and was doing a slow roll. Her gaze skidded around the room. The candles in their etched-glass holders. The rearing grizzly bear Tony had carved. The blue-shaded lamps glowing on the end tables. Things she loved, suddenly meaningless.

She dragged in a shuddery breath. Her sister and brother-in-law would probably stay with Susan's roommate, Rika, tonight. She pictured her slender sister roaming the apartment, compulsively tidying. When Lorna wore the edge off her energy, Alden would insist they pray together and try to sleep.

Tony blew his nose, then drew her head to rest against his shoulder. "You've got to cry. Let it out."

Ruth's eyes were so dry they burned. Part of her heart begged God for help, but part lay crushed beneath her pain. Her niece was dead. Murdered. And God? God hadn't spoken after all. Hadn't intervened.

A harsh wail split her grief. Ruth sprang to her feet before her thoughts caught up. The smoke detector. "My sauce!"

Tony grabbed a magazine from the coffee table and strode into the hallway to fan beneath the piercing alarm.

Ruth ran to the kitchen. She snatched the pan from the stove and dropped it into the sink. The acrid tang burned her nose. The sauce was a dull brown mass, riddled with pock marks where the steam had escaped. Dry. Barren. Ruined. Tears flooded her eyes.

Tony walked into the room. "Phew. Guess we'd better open a window."

Ruth gulped. Suddenly, she needed to be alone. She dodged past her husband, fled to the bedroom, and flung herself face down on the bed in the dark.

The bedside lamp clicked on, then the mattress tilted as Tony sat beside her. He rested a warm palm on the small of her back.

She turned her head toward him, the linen duvet cover soft under her cheek. A few hard blinks brought his tear-blurred form into focus. She read her pain mirrored in his eyes.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again.

She yanked a tissue from the box on her night table, knocking the Bible lying there. The book hit the carpet with a dull thud. She mashed the tissue into a ball against her trembling mouth.

Eventually Tony got up. Ruth heard him leave the room, heard him call the fabric store and say she wouldn't be in tomorrow. A death in the family.

A fresh surge of anguish scalded her stomach.

He left a similar message for his secretary at Citadel High. Before long, he came into their room and changed into brown print flannel pyjamas. He bent to stroke her hair. "Why don't you get ready for bed?"

Ruth blinked at her wristwatch. It was only nine o'clock, but there was no point staying up.

Nestled in her husband's arms, she stared into the darkness and tried to pray. For Lorna and Alden and their son, Ian. For Tony and herself.

Tears oozed onto her cheeks. *God, do You hear me? Do You care?*

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Janet Sketchley is an Atlantic Canadian writer who likes her fiction with a splash of mystery or adventure and a dash of Christianity. Why leave faith out of our stories if it's part of our lives?

She's the author of the Green Dory Inn mystery series, the Redemption's Edge Christian suspense series, and the daily devotional books, *A Year of Tenacity* and *Tenacity at Christmas.* She has also produced a fill-in reader's journal, *Reads to Remember: A book lover's journal to track your next 100 reads* (available in print only). Find her online at janetsketchley.ca.

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