Secrets and Lies

Redemption's Edge
Book Two

Expanded Anniversary Edition

Prologue and Chapter 1

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Prologue

"THOSE BROWNIES ARE for my movie night." In the apartment's galley-style kitchen, Carol Daniels stepped around her teenage son, Paul, and put away the cup she'd been drying.

He lifted another square of rich brown cake from the pan, balanced it on the stack already on his plate, and shot her a grin. "Jackie's always on a diet. I'm reducing the temptation."

"Right." Carol flicked him with her tea towel and grabbed a dish from the drainer.

A knock at the door said her friend from downstairs had arrived. "Want to hang around and see what movie she brought?"

Paul curled a protective hand over his food. "And risk sharing?"

He headed for his bedroom as she went to answer the door. The dog jostled past her, tail wagging. "Hey, Chance, I can't let her in if you're in the way."

She nudged the dog aside with her knee and spotted a white envelope on the carpet. Someone in the building must be doing another fundraiser. She picked it up, checked the peephole, and pulled open the door. "Don't trip over the welcoming committee."

While Jackie stooped to rub Chance's ears, Carol slit the envelope with her finger and pulled out a sheet of paper.

> *Your brother thinks he's safe in jail, but you and your son are easy targets. Especially the boy.*

Tremors spread from her stomach. Rocked her whole body. She read the words again. And again. Studied the envelope. It bore her name in bold letters. "I—did you see anyone out there?"

"No. Why?" Jackie straightened. One look at Carol, and she reached for the note. "What's wrong?"

Carol held out the paper and wilted against the wall. Chance pressed his muzzle into her leg, whining softly.

Jackie took her arm and led her into the living room, then sat beside her on the couch. "You need to call the police."

"Maybe." Carol stood, stepped around the dog, and walked to the window. In the evening light, the traffic, pedestrians, and scraps of windblown litter on the street below looked the same as always.

What did she expect, a guy in a mask wearing a "villain" sign? Whoever he was, he'd left the note and was long gone. Another nut case.

Except this one sounded dangerous.

She turned to Jackie, speaking low so Paul wouldn't hear. "What can the police do? Every time there's something about Harry in the news, the crazies start calling. Even with our unlisted number. After the stunt that reporter pulled last week, they know where I live."

The memory sparked a slow burn in her cheeks. She roamed the cramped living room, tidying what was already tidy, straightening already-straight pictures on the walls. Forget the new job she'd applied for and her hopes of a higher salary to ease life for her and Paul.

Jackie's voice broke into her thoughts. "What about witness protection?"

"It's only been harassment until now, and we're not witnesses to anything. We're just related to a dangerous offender."

Carol darted into the kitchen and grabbed the pan of brownies. She carried them to the couch, plopped down beside her friend, and crammed the first one into her mouth whole. She forced herself to chew the second one slowly and concentrate on the taste, the texture.

Jackie waved off the food and drew her knees to her chest. "What are you going to do?"

The brownie went down in a lump that brought tears to Carol's eyes. "We have to move. Paul's all I have left."

"Where will you go?"

"Somewhere we can lose ourselves."

Chapter 1

Three months later

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 shadowed 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 dream's afterimages 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 slung low across his hips. An oversized brown leather jacket hung open over his faded tee shirt and jeans.

She 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 now, each beat heavy, sodden. Hopeless.

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

After a minute, she released him 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, she pressed her fingertips against Paul's door. Light snores reached her through the wood. Her firstborn—the only one left to her since they'd lost his brother, Keith.

She 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 her lips into a smile.

At least the bright tempo swept away the final shards of her dream. She grabbed the kettle and added 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.

Once she'd plugged in the kettle, she 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 once or twice a week. Part of the job, but he did it well. "What're you up to at this hour of the morning?"

She dipped the teabag, turning the water amber-gold. The scent

of peppermint teased her nostrils. "Making myself a cup of 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 kitchen, 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 unmuted his station mic.

She slid a chair out from the table. Half-listening to Joey on the radio giving the next lineup 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. "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 cold to the core, more... desolate? And shaken by aftershocks?

"I just bought us twelve minutes, so shoot."

She 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 her lips. "The boys never knew how big a rat Skip was. Paul built him into a 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 glanced 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.

Even so, she shouldn't have lowered her defences. From now on, she'd be more careful. She 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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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?

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