Without Proof

Redemption's Edge
Book Three

Expanded Anniversary Edition

Prologue and Chapter 1

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A father to the fatherless,
a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling.
God sets the lonely in families,
he leads out the prisoners with singing;
but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.

Psalm 68: 5-6, NIV

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Prologue

2015

THE MAN ROAMED the cramped apartment, phone to his ear. Nothing in the other's report could account for his disquiet.

His thoughts drilled to the heart of his concern. "You're certain she doesn't suspect the truth?"

The dead man's fiancée was the variable that worried him most.

"I'm telling you, she's not a threat to the organization. Even if she did start asking questions, there's no proof. Who's going to believe her? She's not worth the effort to neutralize."

"If she gets in the way—"

A sharp exhale hissed through the speaker. "We've invested too much in this operation to get cold feet now. Trust me to do my job."

Kneading the back of his neck with stiff fingers, the man ended the call.

If Amy Silver became a risk factor, he'd involve himself directly. No matter the consequences.

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Rewind: December, 2013

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
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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.

A real tree. The pungent sharpness flavoured every breath. She'd made do with 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 Quebec cemetery while she took refuge with his best friend here in Nova Scotia.

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

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

Aunt Bay returned to the living 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 hot drink."

"Orange spice. It's a good Christmas tea."

Aunt Bay didn't look any more filled with seasonal joy than Amy felt. Mere months since the tragedy, all three of them were floundering in grief, but Michael and his aunt claimed Christmas mattered more than ever in the midst of the pain.

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

The older woman queued some soft 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."

Delicate white 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 focused on 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—" The golden tea rippled in her cup.

The older woman's shrewd blue gaze pinned 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.* She set her mug on the table and rammed the footrest 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. The perfect excuse to leave the room. "Excuse me."

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

"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 there a problem?"

"I've 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 endure more Christmas music, not even to retrieve her mug. She limped into the kitchen. Not bothering with a light, she 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 from his paint-streaked work clothes to a soft green sweater over a turtleneck and brown pants, ready for the evening out. "Aunt Bay said she upset you."

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

"That doesn't make it better." He hesitated in the doorway, his hazel-blue eyes uncertain. "You don't mind being here by yourself tonight, do you?"

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

His brows pulled together. "Should I 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, she plugged her phone into the speaker dock. Mellow jazz replaced the happy-peppy seasonal sounds.

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

Gilles' father wore his grief etched in his face. He seemed smaller, a shrunken parody of the vibrant son he mourned. He stood on the doorstep, shoulders hunched in his expensive wool overcoat, and offered a smile. "How are you feeling?"

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

Luc inspected the Christmas tree before turning toward 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 for 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. "My engagement ring!"

Her fingertips caressed the golden circle, ached to return it to her hand. But those days were over.

Luc's countenance darkened. "I found it in the safe at home. I swear, I didn't know she had it."

Amy drilled him with a stare. "The hospital staff gave Honore my jewellery for safekeeping. When she cleared all my belongings 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 swiped a hand across his face. He still looked lost.

Her 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 it could have been different." He walked to the door.

Amy followed. "Luc? Thank you for my ring. For bringing it in person."

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 slipped the ring from its envelope and pressed the diamond to her lips. She had so few connections to Gilles. A handful of photos on her phone and one or two gifts his mother hadn't realized came from him. Honore had taken the rest.

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 ring nestle against her chest, a shiver swept her shoulders.

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

Amy stared 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.

Chapter 1

2015

THE DOORBELL ECHOED from the main floor. Amy dropped the square of sandpaper onto the wooden picture frame she'd been finishing and flexed her aching fingers.

Overhead, light footsteps headed for the door. Michael's aunt could sign for the delivery, but Amy wanted to check the boxes. She rolled her shoulders to work out a kink, then slid from the stool and brushed a layer of dust from her clothes.

Aunt Bay's sharp tone met her at the top of the basement stairs. "Why should she talk to you?"

Not the printer order after all. *She, as in me?* Amy took a few silent paces but stopped out of sight.

"Please, I'm on a deadline." A male voice, light and with a hint of a quiver.

Michael's aunt had that effect when she wanted. It might be fun to let her soften this guy up a little longer, but Amy continued into the hallway. "Is there a problem?"

Aunt Bay huffed at the man. "Come in, then. But one word from her and you'll be leaving."

The visitor took three quick steps inside before she could change her mind, his focus locked on Amy. "Amy Silver?"

"Yes?"

He wasn't much bigger than Aunt Bay but closer to Amy's age. A bit older, maybe in his late 20s. Black, with tight-curled hair and black-framed glasses. Despite the passive speech, his gaze spoke determination. He wore a short-sleeved button-down shirt, open at

the collar.

He stuck out his hand. "Troy Hicks, a friend of Michael's. I'm a journalist."

Amy shook it. "And?" Did he want to write about the art gallery? Why would Aunt Bay object?

Troy adjusted the laptop bag strap on his shoulder. "I know this is a sensitive topic for you, but I'd like to ask about your accident."

Amy glanced at Michael's aunt. Felt the quiet of this rambling house that had become her sanctuary. Focused on Troy. "Why? It's been almost two years."

Dark brown eyes studied her. "There was a similar crash in the States recently. The local paper is interested in a follow-up on your recovery. Just a short human interest piece."

Pain radiated in Amy's hip, and she shifted her weight to her good leg. "I live with the after-effects every day." She wasn't crazy about being in the news, but after all Michael and his aunt—great-aunt, really—had done… A positive mention of the artist and his gallery could bring him a new customer or two.

She nodded. "Okay."

Aunt Bay's features relaxed. "Good for you. I knew you were healing."

"If Michael comes home soon, he can join us." Amy led the way into the living room and sank into the nearest chair. The agony in her hip flared, then began to ebb. She pulled a steadying breath.

Troy settled opposite her and opened his laptop on the low table in front of him. He pulled out his smart phone and tapped the screen. "All right if I record this? I'll take notes, but I like a verbatim backup."

"That's fine, I guess."

Aunt Bay returned carrying a tray with three glasses of ice water.

Amy reached for the nearest one. "Thank you. My hip started to go. I needed to sit."

"I saw it in your face, child."

"You're too good to me." Aunt Bay and Michael, both. They'd

taken in a virtual stranger because she had no family of her own. Amy had met Michael, what? Four times before the crash? Five?

Troy moved his laptop onto his knees and flashed a reassuring smile. "I appreciate this. I'll ask some questions, we'll chat, then I'll distill it into an article once I leave."

Aunt Bay set the tray on the coffee table beside his phone, then carried her glass to a chair that let her observe them both. "You'll let Amy see what you've written first?"

One side of his mouth curved down. "That's actually discouraged. Second-guessing dilutes the original tone and causes missed deadlines. Amy, are you concerned I'll misrepresent you?"

She shook her head.

"Okay." He checked his laptop screen. "Two years ago this November, a private plane carrying you and your fiancé, Gilles Renaud, crashed on a rural Nova Scotian highway." He looked up. "I'm sorry, Amy. There are no words for your loss."

Amy's throat tightened. "He was the most alive person I've ever met. Just being with him—his zest for life—it was like switching the lights on in my own life. He had a way to transform even the ordinary into something special. It was more than charm, it was…"

"Joie de vivre."

Amy seized Aunt Bay's phrase. "That's it. He was contagious."

"I didn't know him, but Michael says much the same." Troy paused. "Gilles was an experienced pilot, and weather conditions were fair. I'm told it took a great deal of skill to bring the plane down in one piece."

He glanced at his laptop. "According to my notes, Gilles died from internal injuries, and you spent weeks in the hospital. Life changed that day, but you've found strength to carry on. And you've stayed in Nova Scotia instead of moving back to… Ottawa?"

She'd had nothing, and no one, to return to. "Michael and Gilles were best friends. In his own grief, Michael gave me a place to stay when the hospital discharged me. His great-aunt moved in to help me."

"And to keep folks from talking." Aunt Bay levelled a stare. "I should have introduced myself. Beatrice." She pronounced it *BAY-a-triss*, then spelled it for him. "If you can get your tongue around that, feel free to call me by name. Otherwise, it's Miss Rockland."

A grin split his face. "BAY-a-triss it is. Thank you."

Amy smiled at the older woman. "It was Gilles who nicknamed you Aunt Bay. Michael told me."

"Yes. That first summer Gilles stayed here. An irrepressible teenager ready to take on the world."

Beatrice studied Troy over her water glass. "This was my home at the time. When I moved to a condo in the city, Michael bought the house. The light off St. Margaret's Bay is perfect in his studio, and he gets tourist traffic in the summer."

Troy typed a rapid burst and paused, fingers hovering over the keyboard. "Amy, you mentioned your hip. Is this related to the crash?"

"When the plane crumpled, it trapped my leg. I ended up with a dislocated hip. The surgeon repaired it, but if I stand too long, or over-exert it, the pain flares up." Amy grimaced. "When Aunt Bay and I go anywhere, I'm the one with the cane. At twenty-five."

She waited until he stopped tapping keys. "I wanted a way to give back to Michael and Aunt Bay, so I started helping with the paperwork and accounts between physiotherapy appointments. I'm good with numbers. Michael, your typical artist, isn't. Then I learned how to do framing and other support work to give him more time to paint."

Amy sipped her water and rested the glass on the chair arm. "I could get up to speed with the banking world and apply for work in my field, but I like it here. Less money, but less pressure." Her fingers twisted the end of her ponytail. "So am I healing? Or am I hiding?"

Troy grinned. "I'm a journalist, not a doctor. Sounds to me like you've got a good thing going, win-win all around. Have you kept in touch with Gilles' family?"

Speaking of stress… "Please don't mention them in your article.

They wouldn't appreciate it."

"Noted. Now, there's one other angle I wanted to touch on in passing. Are you satisfied with the investigation into the crash?"

Amy pressed her spine into the chair. "Why?"

"Coverage of the American crash suggests there are ways to sabotage a small plane that are virtually untraceable. Did Gilles do a pre-flight inspection?"

"I followed him around the plane. It was fascinating."

"Forgive me. Did he take it seriously, or was it a formality?"

Amy bristled. "Gilles may have had a reckless streak, but he was obsessive about mechanical safety."

Aunt Bay snorted. "Daredevils can't risk equipment failure. Not that he'd try anything crazy with Amy in the plane. He treated her like spun glass."

"Here's the thing." Troy positioned the laptop more squarely on his legs. "Gilles' pre-flight should have caught any ordinary mechanical issues. After your crash, I asked his flying club about the possibility of sabotage just to cover all the options. They shut me down faster than you can say 'No comment.' I asked again this morning, and they hit me with a guilt trip. Said to respect you, not to dig up past pain."

"Yet you're asking me about it."

"Because I do respect you." Troy leaned forward, one elbow on the edge of his laptop. His features hardened. "If someone did this to you and Gilles, you have a right to know. To see justice done."

Amy stared. "But who? Why?"

"That's the other reason I'm asking. You and Michael knew Gilles best. Did he have enemies? Personal or business conflicts? I won't put whatever you say now in my article, but I'd like to keep recording for myself."

This conversation was unreal. Amy rubbed her hip. "Gilles didn't seem worried at all. He was, when we met. He said he was running away from God. Don't repeat that. We fell in love, he settled whatever was bothering him, and we came here to get married."

"Gilles had a reputation with the ladies, but this would be a pretty extreme response from a spurned lover. I don't suppose you have any enemies yourself, Amy?"

Her scalp prickled. Enemies? She forced a laugh. "Not the murdering kind." Gilles' mother. Her own unseen father. "Besides, I'm an easy target and I'm still alive."

Aunt Bay reached to squeeze Amy's arm. "Thank God for that."

Troy checked his phone. "Michael hasn't replied to my text yet. When he does, I'll ask him the same questions. Thank you both for your time." He shut the laptop and slid it into his bag.

Amy eased forward in her chair, preparing her hip joint to stand. "It's been nice to meet you. Thanks for checking on me, and good luck with your article. I really don't think there's anything to the sabotage idea, though. Just because it could have happened doesn't mean it did. Everyone loved Gilles."

Aunt Bay stood without effort. "I agree with Amy. But I hope Michael invites you back socially. He works too much."

Troy studied the older woman. "Are you a praying person like Michael, Beatrice?"

At her nod, he took her hand. "Then pray for the truth to come out."

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Troy's visit left Amy on edge. She popped two painkillers and forced herself to finish sanding the frame she'd abandoned, but instead of applying the final clear-coat layer, she cleaned up and roamed into the kitchen.

Aunt Bay looked up from sliding a meatloaf into the oven. "You have an hour if you'd like to lie down." She added foil-wrapped potatoes and closed the door.

"Thanks, but I think I'll make tea and sit with the heating pad. Maybe read awhile, unless you'd like to chat." She filled the electric kettle and opened the tea cupboard. "Want a cup?"

"If you're making herbal." Sharp blue eyes studied Amy. "Don't fret over what that young man said. If there was the slightest hint
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of sabotage, Gilles' parents would have never let it rest."

Amy reached for the chamomile tea box, then chose spearmint instead. She tossed two bags into the teapot. "Honore wouldn't. And heaven help the culprit if she found him. But Luc's been different since the crash. I'm not sure he'd notice."

She couldn't blame the man for retreating into his grief, but in the hospital, injured and alone, her encounters with his wife had shredded what was left of her emotions. When Honore cut her off completely, it was a relief.

The kettle clicked off. Amy hadn't heard the water bubbling. Thoughts of Gilles' mother would do that. Her hand trembled as she poured water into the teapot.

The doorbell rang. "This time, it'd better be our delivery." Amy replaced the kettle in its base and started for the door. She should have grabbed her cane from the closet.

Beatrice slipped past her. "Let me. I'll have him bring it in here."

Amy changed direction and took the nearest chair.

At seventy-plus, Aunt Bay could likely heft those boxes herself, one at a time. The courier drivers never let her try. One stamped into the kitchen now, a brown box in his arms. "Afternoon, Miss. Here on the table?"

"Yes please. Thank you."

"No problem." He left and brought in a second box. "The other lady already signed for them. Have a good one."

"You too."

The front door banged shut.

Aunt Bay bustled into the kitchen, Amy's cane under one arm. "In case you need it." She propped it against the wall by Amy's chair and passed her a utility knife. "You open up. I'll pour our tea."

Amy had forgotten the tea. She slit the packing tape and folded back the cardboard tops.

Aunt Bay set two steaming mugs on the table at a safe distance from the boxes.

Both women reached into the nearer box at the same time. Beatrice laughed. "This was your idea. You go first."

Amy pulled out a memo pad, faintly printed with water lilies.

She held it to the light. "I like it. Not too washed out, but light enough to write on. And the gallery name and website at the bottom are clear."

Beside her, Aunt Bay studied another pad. "The hand-written letter may be nearly extinct, but people always need note pads."

They'd chosen elements from Michael's paintings: the white lilies, an antique bucket overflowing with water, ducks on a lake, a waterfall. Along with the muted pads, the boxes held full-colour note cards, desk calendars, and fridge magnets. When Michael sold the original of each painting, he kept digital copies to use in smaller reproduction prints. Why not expand the idea and use snippets from a larger work for gift items?

They had the second box half empty when the front door opened. "I'm back!"

Aunt Bay called, "We're in here, Michael."

Troy's words about sabotage flooded Amy's mind. Her hand froze around a bundle of magnets. What would Michael think?

When he walked into the kitchen, hair tossed from the breeze, his smile sweetened something deep in her heart.

She'd loved Gilles. Always would in a way. But this unassuming painter had no idea how she felt now. Would he ever see her as a woman instead of a co-worker—or his dead friend's fiancée?

His smile slid away. "Of all the times to leave my phone in the car. I just saw Troy's messages. He had no business bringing up the accident."

Amy flipped her ponytail behind her back. "I don't mind him writing a short piece for the local news. He seems nice. But did he tell you his sabotage idea? Can you think of anyone who'd want to hurt Gilles?" She swallowed hard. "Or me?"

Michael's blue eyes darkened, drowning the gold flecks she loved. "Nobody. Troy's a great guy, but he tends to see conspiracies everywhere. Gilles wouldn't want him planting ideas like that."

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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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