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Redemption

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CHAPTER ONE

FROM THE FRONT SEAT of his beat-up Chevy truck, Dirk Bennett stared at his girl's third-story apartment. He watched the shadowy figures of two people come together and stay that way.

A minute passed, then two. Then the apartment lights went out.

Dirk's fingers trembled, and his heart ricocheted against the walls of his chest. He glanced at the revolver on the seat beside him and shuddered. What was wrong with him? He was a nice guy from a nice family. People like him didn't carry guns, didn't lose sleep at night hating a guy for stealing his girl.

Maybe I'm going crazy.

Or maybe it was the pills. They could do that to a person, couldn't they? Make you crazy in the head? No, that was paranoid. Dirk calmed himself down. The pills had nothing to do with the way he felt. They weren't even steroids—not exactly. And they *were* working. He'd packed on ten pounds in the past six weeks—ever since he doubled his regular dosage. Ten pounds of muscle.

Dirk gripped his forehead and tried to remember what his trainer had told him when he sold him the bottle. *Get the formula right. Too little and the lifting would be worthless. Too much and . . .*

Rage, depression, irrational behavior.

Was that what this was, this constant buzzing in his head? Too many pills? Dirk tapped his fist against his forehead. It was impossible. The pills were completely natural; that's what everyone said. Half the guys at school were on them, and no one else was having any kind of reaction.

He stared at the gun again.

It's what anyone would do. He wasn't going to hurt Professor Jacobs, after all—just scare him. Then Dirk and Angela Manning could be together the way they should have been all along.

He had known from the beginning that Angela was the one, the only woman he could ever love. She'd felt it, too, at first, before she met the professor. Dirk shifted his gaze to Angela's apartment. What could she possibly see in that guy? He was at least ten years older than she was, with thinning hair and gray in his beard and the beginnings of a paunch.

Besides, Professor Jacobs was married.

Dirk had seen the man's wife up in the journalism department a time or two, a beautiful, dark-haired woman who laughed and smiled and seemed to be in love with her husband. The whole thing didn't make sense—an old man like the professor with *two* gorgeous women. Dirk bit the inside of his lip. That part would change soon if he had anything to do with it.

In the glow of a streetlight he glanced at his watch and saw it was after ten o'clock. If he wanted to pass history, he'd better get home and write the paper on Civil War generals. It was due tomorrow. Dirk worked the muscles in his jaw as he grabbed the gun and tucked it underneath his seat.

He'd have to scare Professor Jacobs another time.

Then, just as he started his engine, he got an idea—an idea so sound and strong it caused a surge of hope to rise in his heart. Maybe he wouldn't have to use the gun. Maybe there was another way to scare the professor into backing off his girl.

He chuckled out loud as he pulled away from the curb.

Ten minutes later he sat on the floor of his Indiana University

dormitory room, staring at a single entry in the Bloomington white pages as his fingers began punching the numbers.



Not many blocks away, Professor Tim Jacobs lay awake in his girlfriend's off-campus apartment, wondering what was happening to him.

He was used to the guilt and insomnia. But the tears were something new.

Since he'd begun violating his wedding vows, there had been too many times when he was supposed to be at work reading student papers or at one conference or another but instead had been sharing a bed with Angela Manning, possibly the most promising student ever to grace Tim's advanced newswriting class. She was young and idealistic and achingly beautiful, and Tim knew their affair was more than a passing distraction.

Sometimes the realization caused the guilt to grow so loud that it almost took on a voice—a voice that kept Tim awake even when he was dead tired.

The voice was not audible, but many nights it woke him all the same. Tim would be nestled against Angela, intoxicated by the kind of sin he'd never even dreamed about, when from out of nowhere the voice would come.

Repent! Flee immorality. I stand at the door of your heart and knock! Flee . . .

Tim would roll over, hoping to find his way back to sleep, to the imaginary place where his wife, Kari, would not be waiting at home alone, trusting him to be faithful. But the voice of guilt would come again and again—persistent, relentless, tirelessly calling him home regardless of his lack of response.

His lack of worth.

Tim shifted onto his side, trying not to waken Angela. He stared at her plain white apartment wall, and a memory came to

mind—the day Angela Manning first visited him at his office and made her intentions clear.

They had talked for fifteen minutes, teasing and laughing and sharing sentiments of mutual admiration while Tim twisted his wedding ring, hiding it behind the fingers of his right hand.

When Angela left the room, a scent of musky jasmine remained. And enough heat to warm the building. Tim spent the minutes before his next class savoring the way she made him feel. But as he left his office that day his eyes settled on a plaque Kari had given him for their first anniversary. It bore the engraved image of an eagle in flight and words he remembered even now: *The eyes of the Lord search the whole earth . . . to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.*

In that moment everything about serving the Lord had felt binding and restrictive. Without too much thought he swept up the plaque, dropped it in the nearest file drawer, and strode out of his office.

It remained hidden in the drawer to this day.

Tim blinked as the memory faded. The plaque no longer applied to his life; it was best left out of sight. His strength didn't come from having a heart committed to God. Not anymore.

Since the hot August night when he and Angela first slept together, Tim's strength had come from being with her. And from his professional accomplishments, of course. Tim had devoted his career to excellence in print, first as a working journalist, then as a teacher of the craft, training a yearly crop of reporters who would carry on America's devotion to preserving a free press. In relatively little time, he had become a respected professor who also wrote a regular column for the *Indianapolis Star*. In the most influential circles of the discipline, Tim's name was gaining recognition.

That was a kind of strength that made a difference in life.

Another reason for his power was his absolute commitment to journalistic integrity both in the field and in the classroom. Back when he was reporting, he had never revealed a source. And even though he was a churchgoer—well, he *used* to be a church-

goer—he had never let his religious faith stand in the way of his ability to practice objective journalism. Religious bias had no place either in the newsroom or in the educational process—not when a reporter could do his best work only with an open mind.

Kari had always struggled a bit with Tim’s thoughts about faith and the press. But not Angela.

She treasured the fact that Tim was a “man of faith,” as she put it. But she also admired him for his ability to put aside his personal beliefs when he wrote a column or lectured to a class. “We never knew exactly where you stood on issues,” Angela had told him later, transfixing him with her electric blue eyes. “But we always knew you stood for good journalism. We knew you’d never cave, never give in. Do you know how rare that is these days?”

He was Angela’s hero, no doubt. It was something he’d known from that first day when she had showed up at his desk after class the spring of her junior year and had asked him out.

“Professors can’t date their students,” he told her, stifling a smile.

She simply held his gaze, her directness both disconcerting and alluring. “Can they have lunch together?”

They had lunch. The office visit happened a week later.

After that, month after month after month, he fought the temptation. After all, it truly was policy that a professor couldn’t date a student currently in his classes, though the university’s Ethics and Harassment Department had long since agreed that there was nothing wrong with a mutually consenting relationship once the shared class had officially ended.

So Tim had held back, flirting with Angela, enjoying lunches and study times with her, but refusing to cross the line. When summer came and Angela returned to her hometown of Boston, Tim felt relieved, glad to be free from the guilt of their flirtation. He tried to put Angela behind him, to focus on his marriage. But Kari was gone nearly every day, too busy to spend time with him, often too tired to respond lovingly to him at the end of the day.

When Angela returned to school, Tim finally had to admit the truth to himself, even if he wasn’t ready to admit it to his wife.

He was in love with Angela Manning. Deeply, completely in love. It was wrong, no doubt. But he couldn't deny his feelings or the way she left him unable to choose anything but time with her.

And it was since that realization that the voice of guilt had been nothing short of relentless.

Repent. . . . The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.

The voice spouted Bible verses at him, passages he'd memorized as a boy but hadn't read in years.

I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full.

Tim liked that one least of all. *Life to the full*. As if reading a Bible or going to church every time he earned a day off could possibly compare with the way Angela made him feel.

Life to the full?

The Bible was obviously mistaken on that point. In Angela's arms life had never been more full. So Tim had gradually let go of the beliefs that had once been the foundation of his life—a foundation that now seemed flawed and almost ridiculous.

He'd doubted some of the details for a long time, of course. A world made in six days? An ark with hundreds of animals, floating above a world of water? People cured of diseases by simply taking a bath or having their eyes covered with mud? Tim had long ago written off such events as either symbolic or simply irrelevant.

But recently he had started to ask even more fundamental questions. What if God didn't exist after all? What if the Bible had been made up by a group of religious leaders intent on dictating the moral fiber of a society gone bad? What if real life, real truth, lay in the finding of one's soul mate? Someone whose soul seemed like a missing piece to one's own?

Someone like Angela.

In the weeks since he and Angela had begun sleeping together, the questions had gradually become statements in his mind, until

now he was ready to let go of the crutch of religious tradition entirely, ready to embrace the reality of new life with his new love.

What he wasn't ready to do was tell his wife, and therein lay the struggle. He knew that the only right thing was to confess the affair. But when Kari met him at the door each evening, he couldn't bring himself to look her in the eye and tell her the truth. That he wanted a divorce. That he was in love with another woman—a student, no less.

It did not take a psychiatrist to figure out the most likely source of the guilt that interrupted his days and kept him awake at night. And it wasn't hard for Tim to convince himself that the whispered flashes of Scripture were figments of his imagination, a consequence of confused brain signals or perhaps the manifestation of an overactive conscience.

So he chose not to dwell on the fact. The guilt would pass in time, once he acted on his decision to leave Kari, once the stress of a double life was behind him. The voices would eventually stop, though for the time being they made sleeping almost impossible.

And that's where things were different now. For weeks the guilt had awakened him with gently persistent preachy sentiments about truth and repentance.

But lately, that same guilt had been waking him with something else.

Tears.

These thoughts, all of them, came in the time it took to realize it had happened again. In the midst of a perfectly good night's sleep next to a woman who had captured his heart and intoxicated his senses, Tim Jacobs, respected professor and ace columnist, was crying.

Weeping quietly as if someone had died.

Tim blinked to clear his vision, and suddenly he knew that someone had indeed ceased to exist. Himself.

Quietly, discreetly, he silenced the sobs and wiped his tears, but none of that erased the sadness in his soul, a sadness so deep and true he ached from the power of it. As if a veil had been lifted

from his heart, he saw everything he'd once been—the idealistic boy, the energetic teenager, the God-centered college student, the hardworking journalist, the romantic groom. The loyal husband.

That man was dead.

His betrayal of Kari had fired a final, fatal bullet into what remained of the man he'd once been.

There in the darkness, with Angela curled up beside him, lost in sleep, the sadness within him grew. He cried for Kari, the sweet young woman to whom he'd promised a lifetime. He cried for the children they'd never have and for the growing old they'd never do together.

Tim swallowed back a lump in his throat and tried again to clear the tears from his eyes. Where were these feelings coming from? Why were they hitting him now? His love for Kari had cooled long before he met Angela. Still, Kari was his wife. As much as he longed to be with Angela, Kari deserved better.

Why have I let things get so bad? What's happened to me? What have I become?

The answers were ugly and came as quickly as the questions, forming a stranglehold on Tim's heart. As strong and capable as Tim thought himself to be, the depth of sorrow that surrounded him now was enough to destroy him. It was a moment that would normally be accompanied by the voice of guilt, assuring him that even now redemption was his for the asking.

But as Tim cried quietly into Angela's pillow, mourning for the first time the man he'd once been, the marriage he was about to lose, and the fact that he had no intention of changing his mind, he realized something that was more heartbreaking than the other losses combined.

The words on the plaque Kari had given him were right. Without God he wasn't as strong as he'd thought. Not at all. And that's why the tears flowed so easily these days. Because in its hardened state, his brittle heart had done something he'd never expected when he first took up with Angela Manning.

It had broken in two.