

FINAL REDEMPTION

DESTINY IS CALLING

A NOVEL BY

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CHAPTER ONE

Emmy Harris never expected to celebrate the last day of school sitting at the foot of her mother's grave. Having just completed her second year as a 7th-grade history teacher at West Middle School, she should have been partying at Jasper's with her best friend, Jodi, and her other team teachers, as planned. The end of the year was the only time when the usually subdued faculty let loose and got a little crazy, right before hitting the beaches or part-time jobs that were a welcomed break from their daily middle school grind. But the events of the night before had her already feeling more than a bit crazy and, ultimately, brought her to the only person she thought she could talk to—the mom she never knew.

The cemetery was set on a slight hill that once overlooked a rundown drive-in movie theatre that was torn down long before Emmy was born and replaced with a Smart-Mart discount shopping center. Even though the sun was shining brightly, the ill-maintained landscaping and storm-tattered tree line gave a morbid people-lay-dead-here feel to the place. Dried leaves and branches, along with empty cigarette packs and beer bottles left by teenagers, lay strewn against a rusting chain-link fence that separated the property from the shopping center. Emmy's mom's grave was located about ten yards from the fence at the foot of the hill, along the side road of the shopping center. Her grandfather had purchased one of the last plots available, as her mom's death was an unforeseen trauma few parents plan for.

Emmy was only four years old when her mother, Beth, died of cervical cancer in her early twenties and was buried here. Her memories from the funeral and all that happened beforehand had long faded. She remembered the graveyard was much greener back then, and the small asphalt road that wound through the property was gravel. However, these trivial details were nearly all that she could recall about that time, except for bits and pieces of her yearly visits on her mom's birthday, and one other thing—the gravestone.

Her mother's gravestone was a big deal for her family, especially her grandfather, Frank Harris. As she grew older, Emmy thought it was odd that they placed such importance on a stone marker and remembered the day it was unveiled to her at the gravesite. It was her grandfather's creation and took almost a year to make, after stubbornly arguing with the stone maker and metal crafter over what they saw as design flaws. Frank was sure that he knew better than them, and he was the paying customer, only he didn't.

The stone was of medium height, which wasn't unusual at all, except for the fact that it was made of gleaming white marble that made it stand out amongst the normal gray granite stones in the cemetery, especially on a dreary day. Emmy remembered thinking when she first saw it that it looked like something a princess would have at her grave for being so special. The stone maker tried to explain that marble was no longer used, because it was too soft and could not endure the test of time, but Frank insisted that it be the purest white the stone maker could find. Now the marble had a yellowish hue that would catch your eye as something odd, instead of strikingly beautiful.

Emmy's eyes traced the smooth carvings of hovering hummingbirds facing inward towards her mom's name on the two top corners of the stone, whose nooks were now filled with green and black moss, and felt a little sadder than usual from the reminder of how long she had been without a mother.

She continued to follow small spider vein cracks that started at the tail of the left hummingbird and fanned out to the tip of the B in her mother's name, where her eyes dropped onto the most unusual

piece of the headstone. Right below the name, between the etched dates that marked her mother's short life, was the word MOMMY formed in copper pennies.

Emmy did remember how beautifully those copper pennies gleamed against the stark white marble that day, and how much she had loved and obsessed over pennies when she was young, even more than buttercups and dandelions. Emmy had discovered that shiny, clinking pennies were as abundant as raindrops that fell from the sky. Everyone always had some on them and never hesitated to give them away to her. She was not aware of their monetary value, only that the piles she collected led to a collection of delightfully amusing coin banks that lined her dresser.

She had a dinosaur bank, a jukebox-shaped bank, a really old monkey bank that deposited the coin for you but never worked, along with a half of a dozen different piggy banks—the bright pink one with a daisy glued on behind its ear being her favorite of all the banks. Copper pennies always represented good luck to her. That is why she had squealed with delight when she saw them on the gravestone. Thinking about it now, Emmy was grateful that somehow, back then, her young mind was able to separate the beauty of the stone memorial from the awful truth it represented and that her reaction was able to bring some happiness to her grandfather that day.

It was Frank's idea to put the pennies on the stone for Emmy, because they represented the last good memory he had of his daughter and granddaughter together. Frank had stumbled on Beth and Emmy napping amidst a pile of pennies spread out on Beth's bed, right before Beth became ill. It was the first time he realized that his daughter was far more responsible and caring than he had given her credit for. Her grandmother, Mary, had confided to her once that she thought that the gravestone on some level was his way of trying to make amends for his part in the conflicts that the family went through before Beth died.

Only now, a third of the pennies were missing from being carved out by vandals, as was predicted by the metal crafter, who wanted to encase them in an expensive insert covered with Plexiglas. Frank was too proud to admit that he could not afford that idea.

The pennies remaining were tarnished blue-green and rusted, and most of the heads of Lincoln were beyond recognition. Emmy was sort of glad that her grandfather did not see how bad the gravestone looked today, considering how special the details were to him. The significance of the hummingbirds and the pennies on her mother's stone was only familiar to her, because of the stories repeatedly told by her grandmother to anyone she reminisced with about Beth's passing.

Emmy had lived with her grandparents and her single mother since she was born, and the identification of her father remained a mystery to her even today. Her grandparents avoided the subject like the plague, not that she ever really had the desire to know who he was. This lack of interest had always puzzled her about herself, but she attributed it to being stably raised by both grandparents all her life. The utter devotion that her grandparents gave her turned out to be a huge advantage at times, when she compared her life to her friends.

Her grandfather never spoke about the past voluntarily. Emmy knew that he and her mother had a bad relationship for many years before she died, and that her mom had left the house to live elsewhere for a while before her illness was discovered. Her grandfather would always give her short answers when she approached him with questions. She found out the most information about her mother

through her grandmother. It seemed to her that her grandfather had put all his emotions into that headstone and was content to leave them there for good. He only talked about Beth with any kind of emotion with his friend, Father Pat, who was with the family when her mother died, and, even then, they seemed to speak in code about what had happened.

Emmy remembered there were a few visits to her mother's grave early on with her grandparents, Father Pat, and Mrs. McCafferty, another family friend who worked at the rectory with Father Pat. Beth introduced them to her grandparents before she died. Both had helped her mother through a horrible experience that happened to her while she lived away from them, which her grandfather felt responsible for. Only Father Pat knew all the details about what happened to her mother that involved being date-raped. When Emmy turned sixteen, he told her some of what he remembered about the horrible ordeal. It was a shock to learn about it, and left her wishing that she could meet her mother and find out who this mysterious woman really was.

Mrs. McCafferty died two years after her mother, and the four of them made the visit to Beth's grave together for a couple more years, until Father Pat retired and moved an hour away to a retirement community for priests. When Father Pat disappeared, so did her grandfather. Emmy and her grandmother continued their once-a-year pilgrimage together, until she entered high school, when she decided she did not want to go anymore. This had been the first time she came to visit since then.

The late afternoon sun brought beads of sweat to her forehead, and she grabbed her water bottle out of her bag for a drink. Emmy turned to face away and leaned her back up against the cool stone, which sent shivers down her spine. Looking out over the shopping center, she contemplated on how to begin a conversation with a dead person. Not just any dead person, but her mother, who she had not visited for such a long time. Emmy wondered if she was even there to talk to. She questioned if the dead kept track of how long they had been there and who came to visit them, or do they even hang around their decaying bodies at all? What would be the point to that?

Emmy recalled that people often made comments that they felt the presence of their loved ones who died, but she wasn't sure she ever did. Maybe when she was young? Her grandmother told her that her mother had loved her so much, and that they had made a pact to always be together in spirit, but Emmy did not remember any of the conversations that she was told she had.

Today Emmy had a hard time even remembering what her mother looked like without looking at her picture. She only had her grandmother's memories to go by. She could not remember living with her mother. She could not connect with all the talk by her grandmother and Father Pat all these years about the miraculous events that happened, when her mother got sick and died. Especially the bizarre story about how she had told them that an angel had visited her and took her to Heaven. Or, even more bizarre, the tale her family believed about a little hummingbird that held the spirit of a young man named Matt, who had come from Heaven to rescue her mother. He was supposed to have taken over Father Pat's body, but made a tragic mistake and entered a hummingbird's body instead. And, even crazier, this hummingbird could communicate with her mother like a human.

She argued that they had fallen victim to a little girl's wild imagination and the delusions of a dying person. However, Father Pat was certain that it all happened. He insisted that he had witnessed some of it, though nothing that had to do with her angel experience. If it was true, it was like a veil had

descended upon her shortly after her mom died, and, for the life of her, she could not go back to that time.

Father Pat said it could be post-traumatic stress disorder, but that had seemed melodramatic to Emmy; and, by the time she became a teenager, she did not want to talk about it anymore. From time to time, however, she secretly wondered if she was suppressing the memories of a miraculous angel visit, so she would not have to relive her mother's death and her loss. Or, maybe even more importantly, she would have to face the possibility that no miracles really came from the divine interventions, because her mother still died. So, what did that say about God and angels and rescue missions?

After Father Pat became sick and went into a nursing home, the talk finally ended. The mysterious and wild tale of the angel that visited her when she was four, and the crazy story about the hummingbird that held the spirit of a young man, had faded away from all their grieving desperate imaginations, until today.

Today, Emmy could not dispute those adult fairytales about angels or hummingbirds or rescue missions or little girls going to Heaven. Not after last night, when a tall blonde woman walked out of an indescribable light to stand a foot away from the side of her bed. Emmy was even able to reach out and touch her silky cold iridescent robe, and feel the soft, warm flesh of the angel's hand, before she melted away. Emmy easily could have shrugged it off as a dream with all the stress she had been under, if it was not for the touch that not only felt so real, but also felt so familiar...

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