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Stephanie Engelman

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By Stephanie Engelman

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Summary: A year after her grandmother's death in an airplane crash, Katelyn and her family visit the field where it happened, and Kate finds a single bead from her grandmother's rosary, and as more beads show up, Kate learns that people are crediting the beads with saving their lives--but can the story of the miraculous beads can save Kate's mother from the depression that is ruining her life?

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For Dave and Mary Ann Lear

When I wrote about
the very best grandparents imaginable,
it was only natural
that they would be so much like you.



“By praying the Rosary, those in heaven and on
earth share their feelings, words, and actions.”

—*attributed to Saint John XXIII, pope from 1958–1963*

Chapter One

My feet squish in the mud as I shift my weight, glancing around at the family members gathered in the bare farm field. I wish someone would just speak up and say something. Anything. A nice memory, something they miss, a funny thing she said . . . maybe just that she's in a better place now. But somehow we all just stand here, waiting.

The sun is struggling to peek through heavy clouds that, only a few minutes ago, dumped buckets of water on the field where we now stand. I'm just glad it stopped, or else I'm sure Aunt Mary Ellen would have insisted that we brave the rain to honor Grandma. Being here is hard enough. Getting pelted with rain in the cool air of early spring would have added a whole new dimension of awful.

Finally, Uncle Joseph clears his throat, his Adam's apple bobbing against his starched Roman collar. We should have made bets on who'd talk first. I knew it'd be him. Mom lets a sob escape, then closes her mouth hard, scrunches up her face, and presses her fist against her lips. It's weird to see her like this, though I guess I'm getting used to it. I always thought she was so strong—my rock, the one who always had it under control, always knew the right answer. But ever since Grandma died she seems lost, weak, and totally unsure of herself. I wonder what I'd be like if *she* died? I guess I'll probably find out someday.

Uncle Joseph glances around at the faces of his brothers and sisters, their spouses, and his nieces and nephews, and begins. “Mom would be so happy to see all of us here together. I remember when I was, well, probably a freshman or sophomore in high school—around Kate and Evelyn’s age.” He motions to me and my cousin Evelyn, who’s standing with her family, next to mine.

Uncle Joseph chuckles. “Matthew caught me playing his guitar, rockin’ out to Pearl Jam. I had broken a string. He was so ticked, he threatened to tell my girlfriend about the time—” Uncle Matthew elbows him in the ribs and he changes tracks. “Anyways . . . we wound up on the floor throwing punches, until Mom came in. She never even raised her voice. Just crossed her arms and cleared her throat. This wasn’t the first fight she’d broken up between the two of us that week. She waited until we stopped, put her hands on her hips, and said, ‘Boys, you will always have people in your lives that you have a difficult time getting along with. That’s just part of life. But *you two*’”—Uncle Joseph stabs a finger at the air in front of him—“‘*You two are brothers. You are family.*’ She told us we didn’t have a choice about getting along, and let us know in no uncertain terms that we’d better figure it out, and figure it out quick, because she wasn’t going to have any more of *this*—” He waves his hand at the ground in front of him. “She was right, though. One day, we actually did figure out that we loved each other. And we’ve been best friends ever since. Just like she always used to say: ‘If you can’t love your family—’”

Uncle Matthew breaks in, and they chorus together: “—you can’t love anyone at all!”

A soft rumble of laughter floats across the field as the brothers and sisters, seven of them in all, share in the memory. The mood is finally lightened. Aunt Mary Ellen’s

rosary beads might be spared from total annihilation. If they were made of coal, I'm pretty sure she'd have turned them into diamonds by now. Even Mom, who never smiles anymore, manages a watery smirk when her big brother, Uncle David, puts an arm around her shoulders. I try not to feel jealous when she returns his hug.

Now everybody starts sharing memories: how Grandma loved to cook, but so frequently screwed up the recipes; how she loved to garden, and *always* got *that* right; the time she totally freaked out when a snake slithered in through the basement door; the way she seemed to make it to every grandkid's game, like she could bilocate or something; the fact that she took such good care of Papa when he was sick, and kept ironing his jeans, right up to the last day. Seriously. Who ever heard of ironing jeans? But that was Grandma.

She was pretty awesome.

One thing nobody talks about. Nobody talks about the sunny morning a year ago today, when her plane dropped out of the sky. Nobody mentions that she was headed to Colorado to visit Aunt Liz, or that we heard it on the news before we knew that it was Grandma's plane. Nobody talks about waiting for hours to find out if she was gone. Nobody looks at this field and says, "This is it. This is where the plane went down. This is all we have left of Grandma."

Which seems like the elephant in the room—or on the farm field, I guess I should say. It's why we're all here, after all. But I guess everybody's had enough crying and now they want to try to be happy.

I glance away from my own family, toward another cluster of people standing in the distance. They're here for the same reason, I'm sure, and I wonder about who *they* lost. Maybe a grandmother or grandfather, or both. Or maybe it was a teenager, like me. Thinking about it sends a shiver

down my spine. All those people, headed for a vacation or business trip or on their way home from one, and then all of a sudden it was over.

Is that family trying to move on, too? Are they trying to be happy? Is it working?

Uncle Joseph starts to pray a Rosary. He says that's what Grandma would have wanted us to do, and he's probably right. But Grandma prayed a lot of Rosaries, and look where it got her. So I walk away. I don't know where I'm headed, until I stop watching my feet and look up to see a group of trees on the other side of the field. Another step, I unglue my feet from the muck and start heading toward them. Step by sticky, squelchy step, it's like I'm totally mesmerized by these trees and just have to keep walking. I hear Uncle Joseph droning on behind me, "Hail Mary, full of grace . . ." and everyone else joining in, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

I wonder if she did? Pray for Grandma at the hour of her death? I hope so. I don't like to think about what it must have been like—when Grandma died—but I imagine she could have used all the prayers she could get.

I keep walking toward the trees, and it's almost like I'm being drawn by some kind of invisible force. Once I enter under their canopy, the muck ends, and is replaced by a grassy bed peppered with wild flowers. The wind rustles the leaves, and droplets of water rain gently on my face. I drag a sleeve across my wet cheeks, but stop suddenly when a tiny gleam of light catches my eye. There's something nestled among the tiny purple flowers at my feet.

Stooping down to push the flowers aside, I discover a small, silver bead, and my heart flutters.

It's not possible. The investigators were all over this field, looking for every scrap they could possibly find. How could this have been left behind? I'm having a hard time breathing, and tears blur my vision. I wipe them away, because I have to see this. I have to hold it, touch it—feel the ridges of the letters imprinted on three sides, and run my nail along the cross on the fourth. Everything I am zones into that tiny little bead. . . . It's just a little fragment of a piece of jewelry, right?

But it's not. It's a bead from Grandma's rosary. And not just any bead. *My* bead.

K M R. Katelyn Marie Roberts. That's me. Who else could it be?

I start to shake, and I sink to my knees. I feel the sobs coming up out of me before they rip from my lips. It can't be. It can't be. It. Just. Can't.

I can still hear the drone of the Hail Marys behind me, but I can't make out the words. I kneel on the wet grass, crying, wondering, not understanding. I don't know how much time has passed, but Dad must have seen me wandering into the woods and known something was wrong. I hear his voice from far off, and then suddenly his hand is on my shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Kate, are you okay?"

I fold the bead into my hand and wipe my face with my jacket sleeve again, only this time to wipe away the tears. I look up at Dad and try to pretend that I'm fine. Of course, he knows that I'm not, but that's to be expected here, today. I roll off my knees and sit down on the soggy ground, staring blindly toward the group in the field. Dad joins me, sitting on his jacket to stay dry. I feel the water soaking through my

skirt, but I don't care. He puts his arm around me and we just sit there, listening to the drone of the Rosary prayers coming at us across the soaked earth.

Finally, they're done. Aunt Mary Ellen places a white cross in the ground, and several of my aunts and uncles lay flowers around it. Then they start to break up, heading to their cars. Mom looks toward me and Dad, but doesn't come any closer to us. She probably doesn't want to mess up her shoes by walking through the mud. She definitely doesn't want to have to deal with her daughter's messy emotions.

Dad yells that we'll be right there, but doesn't make any move to get up.

After a few more minutes, I give a final sniffle and stand up, discreetly tucking the bead into the pocket of my coat. I don't tell Dad. I don't know why, but it feels like my little secret—something Grandma left for me and me alone. Maybe I'll tell him later. Maybe I won't.

Chapter Two

When we get back to the car, my brother and sister are already in the backseat. Paul's nose is nestled in a book and Gwen's eyes are closed as she bops her head, listening to music on her headphones.

Mom stands beside the car, tapping her foot, arms crossed and lips stretched in a tight line. "Everyone's already on their way to the restaurant," she says to Dad, her voice an angry staccato. Turning to me, she gives my wet skirt a disapproving glance. "Kate, get a towel from the trunk to sit on. I don't want you making a mess of the car. And get the mud off your shoes."

Dad throws Mom a look, and when I go around the back of the car to get the towel, she follows me. She tries to smile, but it doesn't come even close to reaching her eyes, and I can still see the irritation sparking from her bright green irises.

"This is hard for all of us, Kate. It will get easier as time goes on." She says the words like she's trying to convince herself that they're true.

I want to say, *Oh, yeah? Is that why you're such a wreck? It gets easier? That's why you don't hang out with me anymore, ask me about my day, or try to find out if I like any of the guys at school? Because it gets easier?* The fact is, I'm not buying it. When Grandma died, a big hole opened up in me, and, even though a year's

passed, that hole hasn't gotten any smaller. It's clear that Mom's hasn't gotten any smaller, either. In fact, I think it's gotten bigger.

But I just try to smile back at her, my lips quivering with the attempt. I try to make the *right* thing come out, something simple like, "Yeah, Mom, I know. I'll be fine." But the words get stuck in my throat. She turns on her heel and heads for the passenger seat. I stare at the back of her head, wishing I could have my old mom back.

As we drive to the restaurant, Dad tries to strike up conversation to relieve the uncomfortable silence, but Gwen's listening to her music, Paul's absorbed in his book, and Mom and I both look out of our windows, barely responding. Finally, Dad turns the radio up and settles for humming along. Relieved, I press back into my seat, discreetly patting my pocket to reassure myself that the bead is still there.

Before long, we're on Main Street in the tiny little town of Danville. I look around without interest, barely noticing the old buildings that line the street. We park behind an old-fashioned black and white police car, bearing the restaurant's name, "Mayberry Café," on its side. Dad lets out a laugh and explains that this restaurant is a throwback to some television show from the 1960s that featured a goofy police officer.

None of it really matters to me. All I know is that the bead is warm in my pocket as we climb out of the car and walk into the restaurant. Dad holds the door and breathes in deeply. "Mmmmm, smells like fried chicken," he says, patting his stomach with a smile.

The rest of the family remains quiet as we head up the stairs to our reserved room. I sit next to Evelyn, of course.

"Hey," she says, giving me a small smile.

“Hey,” I respond, and stick my hand in my pocket to feel the bead, feeling guilty that I’m not in a rush to tell even her about it. I tell Evelyn *everything*, but I’m just not ready to talk about this. What would I say? How would I tell her? Would she think I’m crazy? Maybe it’s just a coincidence, and I’m all worked up over nothing. Maybe somebody else had a bead with the letters K M R on it, and they lost it walking around those woods.

Right. Who am I trying to kid?

I feel sorry for the waitress as she approaches, looking nervous. I guess our crew would make *me* sweat if I were a waitress. There are nearly thirty in our party, with a bunch of kids, and most of us have red, puffy eyes from crying. I order a Coke and bury my head in the menu, as if I might actually order something other than a cheeseburger and fries. Really, I just don’t feel like talking, not even to Evelyn. The other kids around me have finished with their menus, and they begin to talk among themselves. I wish that they would all just melt away so I could be alone.

My discomfort makes the time drag by, and it seems like forever before the waitress brings the drinks and takes our orders. When she leaves, I look around at the familiar faces sitting near me. As usual, I’m stuck at one of the kids’ tables. Evelyn’s eighteen-year-old brother, Dylan, is sitting across from me, and their little sister Ava is to his right. My sister Gwen is next to Ava—they’re both thirteen, and best friends like me and Evelyn. Aunt Mary Ellen’s oldest, fourteen-year-old Thomas, is on Dylan’s left, and his twelve-year-old brother, Isaac, is next to him. Isaac idolizes Dylan, so he’s straining around Thomas, hanging on to Dylan’s every word. The two ten year olds—my brother Paul, and Mary Ellen’s fourth child, Daniel—are at the far end of the table, while

Mary Ellen's youngest, Maria, is sitting on my right, busy coloring her paper place mat.

All of the other kids seem to have recovered from the awkwardness of being at the crash site, and I'm the only one who's not involved in a conversation. I still feel a little shaky, ready to cry at the drop of a hat, and I'm afraid to say anything to Evelyn, because I know that she'll see right through me and ask what's going on. So I mumble something about drying my skirt in the bathroom, scrape back my chair, and head down the stairs, hoping for a little privacy.

I find the bathroom, lock the door, and brace my hands on the edges of the sink, looking at myself in the mirror as if my reflection might hold some answers. What drew me to those trees? How did I find a tiny bead in the midst of that huge field, when the investigators missed it? Is it just a coincidence that it's *my bead*, or is it more than that? Is Grandma trying to speak to me somehow? And if she is, what is she saying?

The mirror holds no answers, so I turn to the hand dryer. It won't stay on unless I hold the button, and I find myself pressing it down with my left hand behind my back, while sticking my backside out toward the dryer, using my right hand to lift the skirt toward the air flow. Thank God, it's a one-person bathroom so there's no chance of someone walking in on me.

Five minutes later, finally satisfied with the results, I wash my hands and splash some water on my face before heading out of the bathroom. The walk back to our room takes me through a small gift shop. Not ready to face the crowd upstairs, I pretend to browse the collection of t-shirts, coffee mugs, and knickknacks. I put my hand in my pocket to reassure myself that the bead is still there, then draw it out, rolling it pensively within my fingers. I walk to the window to

seek the sun's light, where I use my fingernail to scrape the dirt from the engraved letter K.

Absorbed in the bead, I don't even realize that someone else has come into the gift shop area until I hear a discreet cough. Looking up, I see a girl standing only a few feet away and hastily shove the bead back into my pocket. She watches me with interest, and tucks an unruly strand of hair behind her ear.

"Can I help you?" she asks, after a too-long pause. The girl looks like she's about eighteen, with blond hair that's pulled back into a messy ponytail. She wears the restaurant's uniform of black pants and a maroon shirt bearing the restaurant's logo.

"Um, no. I was just looking."

"Okay. Well, my name's Chelsea, if you need anything." She shrugs, starting to walk away, but then pauses to ask, "You here with that big group upstairs?"

"Yeah, that's my family."

Her eyes get big. "Wow, that's a big family! Do you guys get together like that often?"

"Well, we used to. I mean, we do Christmas and Thanksgiving and Easter and stuff, but . . . this . . ." I swallow and blink my eyes, not wanting to cry in front of someone I don't even know. "This is different."

"Oh, like somebody's big birthday, or something?"

A small, bitter laugh escapes me. "No, not a birthday. My grandma was on that plane a year ago. The one that . . ." The words catch in my throat.

Chelsea's hand flies to her mouth. Her bright eyes widen and fill with pity. "Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry. How awful!"

"Yeah, well . . . it takes time, but you get over it," I lie with a shrug.

She tries to change the subject. “Uh, so, do you . . . live near here?”

“About forty-five minutes away, in Indy. It’s the first time we’ve been out here.”

“That’s cool. I mean, well, it’s not, but . . .”

I decide to take pity on her. “This is a nice store you’ve got here,” I motion around me.

“Seriously?” she rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I guess—if you’re into washed-up, old television shows.” She laughs, and then looks around a bit nervously. “Well, like I said, if you need anything, just ask.” She starts to walk toward the counter, but stops and turns around.

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“I guess so,” I say, but I’m pretty sure I’m not going to want to answer.

“The thing you were looking at when I first came in, that you had in your hand. What was that?”

I put my fingers in my pocket and wrap them around the bead, which is warm from being tucked safely in my pocket. Without even thinking about it, I pull the bead out and hold it in my palm for her to see. I don’t understand why I would talk about it with this stranger, when I haven’t even told Evelyn, or my dad, but suddenly the words are tumbling from my lips.

“It’s a rosary bead. You know, like from a rosary that old ladies pray with? My grandmother had a special one that my grandfather had made for her; it had a bead engraved with the initials of each of her children. Then, when they grew up and got married, she had beads made for their spouses. And when they had kids, she added beads for the kids. So we each had our own bead, and it had our initials engraved on it. She said she prayed for us every day.”

“Wow. She sounds like a really special grandmother,” Chelsea says.

I pause, and then say quietly, “I found this out in the field today, during the memorial service. This is *my* bead.” I continue to stare at the silver bead in my hand for a moment, then finally look up. Chelsea’s face has gone white, and she’s staring at the bead, too. I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but those big brown eyes have gotten even wider than before.

After what seems like forever, she shifts her gaze to mine. Her mouth is hanging open, and her jaw moves, like she wants to say something but can’t find the words. She reaches her hand out and grasps hold of the nearby counter, as if to prevent her legs from going out from under her.

Finally, still looking straight into my eyes, she breathes, “I found a bead, just like that one. Only it said E M L. I gave it to my friend, Emma.” She looks back down at the bead in my palm. “Emma Marie Lowry. E M L. She—” Her shocked eyes find mine again. “She thinks it saved her life.”