



REDEMPTION

OF THE

Heart

MONI BOYCE

Redemption of the Heart

By

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For all those looking for a little redemption.

CHAPTER 1

Gemma knew there had to be the terrible noise of screeching tires and squealing brakes as she desperately attempted to avoid the inevitable collision. She knew she was screaming, but somehow sound no longer penetrated her brain. Bracing for the impact, which was sure to come, her hands went up protectively in front of her face, hoping to block the glass that was seconds away from breaking into shards. The cars slammed into each other, and she felt her body tossed like there was no gravity while the car flipped end over end before her head struck the steering wheel and she was knocked unconscious.

Rapidly, she blinked her eyes. Police sirens sounded in the distance. She was dazed and disoriented. Something sticky trickled down her forehead. In the air, the smell of the dampness from the rain, mingled with the scent of leaking brake fluid, gas, and oil, filling her nostrils, along with the metallic scent of blood.

Why does my body feel so heavy? She tried to move. Suddenly the memories rushed back to her; the lingering alcohol in her system had caused her to fall asleep at the wheel. She'd hurt someone. Sharp pain knifed through her side, and she realized something wasn't right. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Is the other person okay? Oh God! Did I kill someone? She attempted to yell, to speak, but nothing. The sirens were getting closer, and then finally she heard car doors being thrown open and shoes pounding the asphalt as they ran to her car. Another set of footfalls could be heard running to the other vehicle. A bright light shone on her face, and she tried to blink, but the tears and the blood obstructed her sight. The cop's voice was barely audible, yet she heard him reassuring her that she would be okay. Her eyes fluttered once more before she succumbed to the pain pulling her under.

~*~

Alex ran his hand through his brown hair as he checked his watch for the fifth time in the last half an hour. It was unlike her to be tardy. His wife was never anything but punctual—always adopting the phrase that if you were on time, you were late. While he knew things had been strained between them lately, he was hoping to make things right tonight. She was upset at all the late nights he put in at the restaurant, but she would see, things would slow down once they'd been up and running a year. Pregnancy had been on her mind, but he kept insisting to her that he wasn't ready yet to be a father.

He toyed with his wedding band as he grew restless. His blue eyes glanced at the clock on the mantle and back down to his watch. Maybe he could appease her by setting a timeline on when they could begin trying for a baby. That would make her happy. He smiled to himself as he nervously checked the clock on the mantle once more.

The doorbell rang before he could look at his watch a seventh time. *Why is she ringing the bell? Doesn't she have her key?* He walked toward the door, expecting to find her rifling through her purse. He opened the door, ready to tease her, but came face-to-face with a cop instead. For a minute, there was only puzzlement as he eyed the face of the young cop who stood on his doorstep. When the realization of why the cop was at his door finally

hit him, he got a sinking feeling in his stomach. The officer refused to meet his eyes as he began to speak. Alex held onto the door for support while the cop delivered the news that his wife was dead, killed in a car accident. He shook his head from side to side, willing it not to be so.

“No ... no ...” His lips moved with the words, but he almost wasn't aware of his voice. They were going to have a baby. They were going to be happy. They were going to be a family. The wetness rolled down his cheeks before it registered in his brain that he was crying.

The cop reached out to him trying to console him as he crumpled to the ground.

~*~

Three days later

Flashbacks of swimming in and out of consciousness during her rescue from the mangled vehicle, riding in the back of an ambulance to the hospital, and surgeons operating on her surfaced as she felt herself coming up through the layers of sleep and pain meds. Everything felt numb except the thoughts and memories swirling around in her head. All she had wanted to do was get away from the beatings and his verbal abuse. She figured now she'd get it sitting in a jail cell rotting away. How ironic that after years of hoping she'd see him behind bars, she would be the one doing time. She'd only been drinking that night because he kept forcing it on her. Usually, she never touched the stuff. Hot tears stung her eyes before spilling down her cheeks, and she realized she was crying.

Her senses were finally starting to adjust as her brain shook off the effects of the meds. The disinfectant smell of the hospital made her head hurt. Unfortunately for her someone had opened the blinds in her room, letting in the sunlight. Despite the number of hospital visits she had since being married to Justin, she had never warmed to the atmosphere or felt

safe. The sickening smell of the cleaning products, which tried to mask the stench of illness and death, always unsettled her stomach. The small beeping noises of the monitors and machines only intensified her headache.

Why does the room have to be so bright? Even though the medicine was keeping her brain from registering the acute pain, she still felt the heaviness in her limbs.

Someone entered the room, disrupting her thoughts. She lifted her head and saw an older woman dressed in nurse's scrubs approaching her bed. The woman gave her a warm smile.

"Honey, we are so glad to see you're awake. We had to sedate you for a while to allow you to heal without having to experience the pain while you're awake."

Staring at the woman, she licked her lips.

"Oh, sweetie, let me get you some water. Your throat must be parched." Reaching over to the side table, the nurse retrieved a cup that sat next to a pitcher of water. After she poured water and stuck a straw into the cup, she raised it to Gemma's lips and held it as she drank. Once she moved the cup, Gemma finally attempted to speak.

"The other person ... the car ... are they dead?"

A sad expression flitted across her face, and the nurse patted her shoulder. "Why don't I get the doctor?"

Swallowing, Gemma nodded her head. As the nurse exited the room, Gemma went to move her arm, and that's when she saw her wrist handcuffed to the bed. At that moment, the doctor entered the room with a cop on his heels.

Silent tears streamed down her face as the cop began to read Gemma her rights, and then told her she was being charged with involuntary vehicular manslaughter because she had a blood alcohol level over the legal limit. She nodded her head in acknowledgement when the cop asked if she understood.

Finally, the doctor got the officer to leave the room so he could tend to his patient. He gave her a sympathetic look. She averted her gaze as he began to explain all the damage her body had endured from the accident, and then he cleared his throat to get her attention again. Gemma looked at the doctor.

"We noticed as we worked on you that you had older bruises and bones which had previously been reset and healed ..." He seemed a little uncomfortable.

"Usually, that kind of thing is indicative of abuse. A man who claimed to be your husband—" He saw Gemma's eyes grow wide with fear, and she attempted to try and lift herself from the bed.

Materializing from nowhere, the nurse from earlier helped the doctor restrain her.

"Miss, please lay back down, you'll tear stitches and reinjure yourself. You don't need to be frightened. We didn't let him in to see you. He got too aggressive with some of our staff after we refused him entrance to your room. However, considering the old scars and evidence of what I suspected I figured it was for the best."

Once she settled down again, the doctor continued speaking. "Umm, we also found fresh vaginal tears, which would suggest that you were ... raped."

Gemma refused to look at him. Now she knew why the nurse had been so sympathetic to ... a murderer. They both felt sorry for her.

The doctor realized that she was not going to speak. "We're going to leave you to get some rest."

Before they could leave the room, Gemma requested, "Wait. Please shut the blinds." She swallowed when the doctor nodded his head at the nurse, giving permission for the blinds to be shut. The nurse crossed the room, blocking out the light. Breathing a sigh of relief at finally being in the darkened room, Gemma gave herself over to grief, self-pity, and despair as

her mind drifted back to the night of the accident:

Justin came home all puffed up over something that happened on the job. She feigned happiness at his news as she continued with her housework. Gemma tuned him out, giving him the obligatory exclamations of surprise and congratulations. Then, before she knew it, he was taking the vacuum out of her hands and shutting it off, shoving her upstairs to change so they could go out and celebrate. After changing her outfit four times, and finally finding one that met Justin's satisfaction, they left the house. Never-ending cocktails were shoved into her hands all night. He said she was more fun when she had a few in her. Luckily, she'd managed to spill some of the drinks to avoid drinking everything he forced on her. They went from bar to bar partying all night.

Her head was pounding, and her body ached by the time they arrived home. He wanted to "fuck" and all she wanted to do was sleep. When she resisted, he'd knocked her around and took what he wanted regardless. Now she lay there underneath him. His snores sounded in her ear. She tasted blood on her lip from where he'd struck her earlier. He was still inside of her, having fallen asleep immediately after he came. Once she pushed him out of her and off her body, she was able to get up and clean herself up despite the aches and pains her body suffered. She knew from experience that Justin would be asleep until the morning from all the alcohol he'd imbibed last night. Well, she wasn't going to be here. This time, Gemma didn't care what it took she was finally going to get free of him.

Ransacking her panty drawer, she located the scuffed pocket watch—her one meaningful possession—and stuffed it down her bra. Then she grabbed the car keys and left. Having been a ward of the state for as long as she could remember, Gemma had no family. She planned to drive until the gas ran out; stay in whatever town she stopped in and start fresh. Yes, she was a little drunk, but she didn't think she was that impaired ... until the headlights from the other car alerted her that she'd driven into oncoming traffic too late.

Fresh tears started as she thought about her decision to finally escape

from him. Well, she was getting what she wanted. She was getting away to an eight by ten cell for who knew how long.

~*~

The light drizzle, which started twenty minutes ago, had begun to pick up. Soon it would turn into a downpour, but he didn't care. People had surrounded him all day long and he was glad to finally be left alone. He grew tired of being polite and showing his thanks for all the so-called, heartfelt condolences. By anyone's standards, it had been a nice ceremony. *Funerals could be considered nice, right?* A low, grim chuckle rumbled within his chest. *Nice funeral? Who cared if the fucking funeral was nice? I want my wife back.* His laughter tapered off.

Having no umbrella, Alex pulled his collar up on his coat. He stood by his wife's fresh grave alone. His family left long ago. They tried to coax him to come back to the house where everyone was waiting, but he didn't want to hear everyone tell him how sorry they were for his loss and have strangers tell him what a wonderful person his wife was. He didn't need to hear any of that. He just wanted her here in his arms, in his bed, saying his name, laughing up at him for doing something funny. Hell, he'd even be satisfied to hear her berating him right now. He wanted her here, doing anything, so long as she was here, not a cold, stiff corpse in the ground.

It was chilly out, but he welcomed it. The cold and damp helped numb his body. He wanted it to numb his mind, numb his soul. He missed her terribly.

Shutting his eyes for a moment, he hoped to dispel her presence, but it only made her come full-blown in his mind. His eyes shot open. They were red-rimmed from lack of sleep and weeping. He stared hard at the fresh mound, which now served as her final resting place. It didn't seem real that he would go to bed tonight alone ... and wake up alone for the rest of his life.

Clenching his fists, he dug his fingernails into his flesh, and welcomed the pain. It began to rain in earnest. He stood soaked to the skin as the raindrops mixed with the tears streaming down his face.

Hours had passed since they lowered her into the ground and the light began to fade from the sky. He finally walked to his car and sat for a while in the driver's seat. The rain beat the roof of his car with a ferocity that made it seem as if it mourned his wife's passing as well. His body vibrated with the pent-up emotion that was coursing through him.

Why did she have to die? Why couldn't it have been the other careless driver? He knew his family didn't understand why he chose not to attend the sentencing hearing for his wife's murderer. The woman pled guilty. What else would his presence do other than fuel the hate already growing in his heart? Right now the only emotion he had time for was his grief. Nothing would supersede his mourning for his wife, not even the anger and hatred, which lay festering in his heart, lying in wait like a thief in the night, for the person who ripped her away from him. Finally, he let the dam loose. He allowed the rage, pain, and loss he felt to come pouring out as he howled and beat the steering wheel.

Why is life so fucking unfair?

~*~

Three years later

She had given a blind plea to the charges against her. Knowing she killed someone nearly made her hollow inside and she was determined to accept the punishment and her fate despite the public defender trying to talk her out of it. The judge sentenced her the same day. None of the family members attended the hearing.

Abigail Samantha Woodson. That was her name. The victim, her victim; the woman she killed inadvertently in her escape. She would never

draw another breath, never kiss and hold her loved ones, whoever they were. Abigail Samantha Woodson would never do anything again. She, Gemma, was responsible for that.

Despite her heinous and negligent crime, the kind doctor who put her back together after the accident had sympathy for her. The doctor fit the pieces together after dealing with her husband when he showed up at the hospital. He told the authorities about her abuse after pulling her records, and despite Gemma's unwillingness to talk at that time; he figured she had been running away when the accident occurred. Thanks to the doctor for speaking to the court on her behalf, the judge had given her leniency.

Her time in prison started off rough. Many of the other women who viewed her as fresh meat and an easy target were soon disabused of that notion. Growing up in foster care, she learned to defend herself against not only unwanted advances from foster brothers and overly friendly foster fathers, but the other girls who often found her abundance of black curls and "pretty face" a threat. To what she never understood. She'd been thrown out like they had. Couldn't they see she was just like them? Unfortunately, what she knew in terms of defending herself, had been no match for Justin.

Eventually, the other prisoners left her alone when they saw she wasn't a pushover and wouldn't be made anyone's bitch or coerced into joining up with any gang. She was able to remain one of the few loners. One of the good things that came from this was Justin divorced her, not wanting the connection to her to taint his name since she was a murderer. She bitterly laughed when she heard that. The attorney that brought the divorce papers for her to sign must have thought she was crazy. Happiness filled her at the thought of being free of him. She wanted nothing from him; all she wanted to do was go back to her birth name—Gemma Peyton. No longer Gemma Johnson, she was finally, completely, a hundred percent rid of him.

The day of her release arrived; she served her time as a model

prisoner. Twenty-six years old, with no college education and now a convicted felon, what was she going to do? She rode the bus that would carry her to the halfway house. Her meager belongings sat on the seat next to her; the pocket watch she'd saved that night in her pocket. It was the only thing she cared to get back. She was headed for Hartford, Connecticut, a place she had never been. Albany, New York was where she spent her youth being passed from foster home to foster home and where she survived a hellish existence with her ex-husband. The York Correctional Institution had been her home for the last three years because the night of the accident she had already crossed state lines, which resulted in her receiving her sentence in Connecticut. She could have fought to be tried in her home state, but what was there for her to go back to? No one wanted her. Plus, she hadn't cared where she served her time.

As she got off the bus at the home, she saw a blonde woman standing out front with an older Hispanic woman. Immediately, the blonde woman called her name, "Gemma Peyton?"

She nodded her head.

"I'm Shelby Michaelson, your parole officer, and this amazing woman is Ms. Ramirez. She runs the house here where you'll be staying for now." Ms. Ramirez walked over and gave her a hug, which Gemma was unprepared to receive. The woman then took her by the hand and smiled at her. "Let's get you inside."

As they walked up the steps into the house, Shelby continued to explain to her how things would work. "Once you get settled in, I will take you over to the restaurant where I've secured a job for you. You have to have a job to stay here ..."

Shelby noticed Gemma's lack of conversation, or even some semblance of emotion.

"I try to make sure all the women don't have a hard time transitioning back into society. Despite how the media wants to paint us, we're not all

crooked and corrupt. Some of us do care about the people we're tasked to look after. You made a mistake. It doesn't make you a bad person."

Shelby stared pointedly at Gemma's face and then smiled warmly.

"That's okay, Gemma. I know trust isn't given; it's earned. Hopefully, I'll earn yours ... I'll let you settle in, and we'll head over in thirty, okay?"

Once Shelby left, Gemma sat on the bed, running her hand across the comforter while inspecting the room. In the past, people had let her down and disappointed her so much she wasn't sure how to feel about Ms. Ramirez or Shelby.

Are they really what they seem, or will they eventually morph into some nightmare? All she knew was this was her fresh start; she was finally getting it. She knew that her prison stay could have been much longer. Despite her crime, she had been given a gift. Tears welled up in her eyes. She stashed the few things she had in a drawer, along with the pocket watch.

After she came downstairs, she and Shelby got into her car. Shelby chattered on and on, but Gemma didn't mind. *It's nice to just listen.*

When they arrived at the restaurant Gemma gazed up at the building. The sign read 'Umbria Ristorante'.

"I hope you like Italian," Shelby remarked as they walked to the door and she knocked.

Gemma stared at the ground, nervous about what to expect. *How will they treat me?*

Suddenly, she heard a deep baritone voice yell that he was coming, followed by a crash and curses. She tried to stifle her giggles. The door opened swiftly, and she was staring into mesmerizing blue eyes. She felt like her breath stopped. He was very attractive; his brown hair was matted to his forehead, and the scruff, which graced his cheeks made him even more rugged and handsome. And his mischievous smile made her heart melt. His T-shirt clung to his sweaty body, showing his defined abs. She could see that he was no stranger to manual labor.

Instantly she became conscious of what she must look like, and mentally chastised herself for even thinking this man would hold any interest in her. Was it being in prison for so long without the physical contact of a man that was making her all googly-eyed?

When he reached his hand out to her she blinked herself out of her stupor and hesitantly shook his hand.

“Hi, I’m Alex Chambers. And your name?”

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