

## Chapter One

A noise, a sense of unease, awoke Emma Weber. Her eyes snapped open. A horrible stench, one she would never get used to... body odor and urine, accosted her nostrils. She'd dreamed she was sitting on a comfy couch, sipping hot cocoa, and watching a Hallmark channel Christmas romance. Instead, she'd awaken to the feel of cold cement seeping through the cardboard she called a bed. A year and a half ago, she had a home, a family. Never in a million years would she have envisioned she'd be homeless, living in the Bronx, under a train trestle.

A loud snort, then a cough hacked close behind her, and her breath hitched. Heart pounding, she flipped onto her back and turned to see an old man sitting cross-legged, his back against the trestle support. She gasped. Did he have a gun? A knife? Did he mean to harm her? Her nerves tensed, and before she could move, his eyes rolled up to meet hers, and he smiled.

"Evening."

She scooted away from him, dragging her blanket with her. "W-what do you want?" Her words came out in a trembling rush.

In the dim glow of a far-off streetlamp, he looked as battered and achy as she felt.

The tiny hairs on the back of her neck prickled. She held

her breath, unsure if she should fight or flee.

He stood and stretched. "A place to rest. Nothing more." He smiled, showcasing a set of pearly white teeth.

"You're n-new around here," she managed, her voice dry and shaky. Though she hated the mess her life had become, the people of this encampment, as she came to call the trashy street slum she lived in, were a community and watched out for one another. Strangers were something to be leery of. Newcomers often stole their meager belongings, a worn, ratty shoe too big but treasured, a half-eaten sandwich. This man was no exception. Emma struggled to her feet, clutching her tattered blanket around her, and eyed the stranger.

He wore the same adornments as she did... grime. Tangled gray hair lay limp against his shoulders. His dirty beard held bits of dried food. Torn, soiled pants hung as hers did, like they were meant for a scarecrow and were tied at the waist with rope. Bright blue eyes held hers. The kindness she saw seemed to reach into her soul and caught her off guard. She backed away and stumbled over the hem of her blanket.

The stranger reached out, grabbed her arm, and steadied her. "My name is Charlie. No worries."

"I'm Emma, and every day is a worry." His grip on her arm sent a stab of panic to her chest.

He let go and nodded. "Understandable." Again, he smiled,

and despite her instinct to flee, his easygoing manner softened her tight stance.

"I started a fire earlier. Would you care to join me?" He motioned to dancing flames inside an old barrel.

Funny, she hadn't smelled smoke or noticed flames lighting up the trashy area under the trestle. She blinked at him several times, her mind numb.

"I promise. I mean you no harm." His calm, reassuring voice trailed off, and she realized he meant what he said.

She shook the stupor away. "Sure. Thanks." Emma picked up her suitcase, her life's worth in such a small bag. Someone would snatch it if she turned her back. She followed him to the rusty barrel and set her suitcase at her feet, then hugging the blanket around her, she positioned herself opposite him.

Illuminating fire bounced off the metal rim, and Emma inhaled the sweet underlying smell of charred wood that, for the moment, masked the stench of urine and feces wafting in the breeze. The welcomed heat warmed her hands.

"So, Emma, how long have you been here?"

"Four hellish months."

"Believe me. This place is nothing compared to hell, or so I'm told. What happened?"

"Life, and not what I expected." Emma watched flames dancing and hissing inside the makeshift firepit. Her life had

changed overnight, then spiraled downhill. Death. House foreclosed. Car repossessed. Job lost because she no longer had a permanent address.

"Life is not a straight arrow leading you in one direction," he murmured. "The winds can blow you off course, lead you down a different path."

Emma glanced across the barrel to Charlie. "Well, I got blown away in a storm."

"You want to talk about it?" His voice, low and full of kindness, and the compassion in his eyes, so uncommon among the people here, gave Emma pause. No one wanted to hear her sad story when they had their own reasons for winding up homeless. Was he being kind, or did he have some nefarious agenda?

Emma shrugged. She wasn't about to pour her heart out to a man she'd just met. Talking about her mess of a life made its reality cut that much deeper. *Don't think. Don't go there...pity parties are for the desperate. Remember that.*

Charlie's eyebrows canted. "Okay, then..." He rubbed his hands over the fire. "What do you say about getting a bite?"

The thought of food made her stomach twitch. She'd missed the evening meal at the mission. The bus was running behind schedule. She refused to pick through garbage cans for scraps others tossed away and mostly lived on coffee, and soup and crackers. Back when she had a home and money, she'd never

considered the leftovers she dumped out, never thought about those who went hungry every night. Now she was living the nightmare. What she wouldn't give for a hot meal on this cold night.

Charlie was still rubbing his hands together. "I know of a soup kitchen that just opened. It's not too far a walk."

Emma glanced at her watch. "It's after 10pm." Going anywhere alone with this man could be dangerous, especially in the dead of night. Was a hot meal worth the risk? She could wait until morning and eat breakfast at the mission, as usual, but still, something about Charlie compelled her to inquire further. "Will they still be open?"

"They cater to the late-night crowd."

"Oh...I...ah..." Emma bit her lip, then: "I don't know. The boozers, the druggies, they're a tough bunch. It isn't safe to wander about this time of night."

"I hear the kitchen is serving pot roast, hot coffee, and fresh biscuits."

Once again, her stomach let her know it was empty, kinda jumped at the memory of bacon and biscuits. It all sounded too good to be true, which gave her pause again. "You go ahead. I think I'll just stay here and enjoy this fire."

Charlie continued to rub his hands over the barrel. "Come on. The walk will do you good, fresh air, and besides, the fire

is going out."

Sure enough, the flames died as if on command, and the cold night air seeped in through her blanket. She knew she needed a meal to maintain her strength and body temperature. Charlie's offer was sounding better by the minute. His smile was disarming and pushed past her need for caution. "Okay." She grabbed the handle of her suitcase and tipped it on its wheels. "Lead the way."

The farther from the camp they walked, the more unease crept along her skin, causing her palms to sweat. Icy fear twisted her heart. What did she know of Charlie? His family, his home, his job; where did he come from, where was he going?

A streetlamp, on its last breath, flickered, casting eerie patterns on the desolate, shadowy street. The constant rumble of her suitcase wheels rolling over the pavement grated on her nerves. *What was I thinking?* Leaving camp and those who knew her just because she was hungry...*foolish*. She shifted her gaze in search of someone who might help her just in case she found herself in trouble.

A couple approached and gave them a wide berth, even went so far as to step off the curb and into the street. They glanced uneasily at them and hurried by.

*Who am I kidding?* If she had to call out for help, people would run in the opposite direction. She wasn't worth fighting

for. She was on her own. Hell, nothing new. Married life hadn't been any different. Her husband spent his time working, and he rebuffed her suggestion that she get a job. She'd spent many days by herself. Childless herself, meeting a PTA mom was out of the question. If it wasn't for her sketch pad, she'd have died of boredom. Crazy though...despite it all, she still loved the man.

A gust of wind caught her off guard. "Boy, it's windy tonight." A hot spike of adrenaline shot through her, punching her heart to beat faster. She gathered her baggy Northface jacket, one of her last expensive purchases, tighter around her neck and fought the brutal cold seeping through her clothes and settling into her joints. "And cold, too." She shivered.

Charlie glanced at her and smiled. "You shouldn't concentrate on the headwinds in your life but focus on your tailwinds."

Mostly, she'd put her past behind her, and if he thought using metaphors spurred positive thoughts, well, he was preaching to the choir. She woke up every morning doing her best to think positive. Her luck was going to change. She'd find a job today. But lately, with every door shut in her face, with every city agency worker who told her the affordable housing wait-list was six months long, or how they were under-funded and unable to put her up in a motel room, hope dwindled, and it got

harder and harder to push past the obstacles holding her down. She wondered if any of her prayers were being heard.

"The kitchen should be around this bend. Yup. There it is." Charlie pointed.

At the end of a row of closed stores, a welcoming light shone from a large window. A few days ago, paper covered the windows and no sign of what was to come had been evident.

Relief eased Emma's tight shoulders.

Inside, men and women sat at large rectangular tables. Above the door, a sign read Saint Ann's Soup Kitchen.

A woman, who looked to be in her late sixties, waved them in. As they stepped into the warm room, she hurried over. "Welcome. I'm so glad you came. Please have a seat." She gestured to a table.

Charlie pulled out a chair. Emma sat and placed her suitcase on the floor beside her.

He took a seat next to her. "Best meal in town, or so I'm told."

"I'm Julia and I'll be serving you."

Serving her? Emma stared up the woman before her. At the mission patrons stood in line, trays in hand and were handed food through the kitchen window, cafeteria style. This was a pleasant surprise.

"We have pot roast on the menu tonight," Julia said with a



smile.

"That sounds wonderful. Thank you." Emma noticed Julia's manicured nails. The bright red polish, a beacon to her past, brought back the enjoyment of monthly visits to the nail salon. A routine she missed. Embarrassed by the dirt beneath her nails that never seemed to come out, no matter how many wipes she used, Emma tucked her hands under the table.

Within minutes, Julia returned with plates piled high with meat and vegetables. The delicious aroma made Emma's mouth water.

Charlie bowed his head. "Dear Lord, we thank you for this wonderful meal." His gaze connected with Emma's, and he smiled. "Now, let's eat."

Emma's first bite tasted heavenly. Savoring the flavor, she let the melt-in-your-mouth beef sit on her tongue before swallowing. She forked a potato and then dunked a biscuit in the gravy, and a few baby carrots went down next.

"Good, huh?" Charlie mumbled as he shoveled food into his mouth.

Emma nodded, then took another forkful of meat. She was hungrier than she'd thought.

Dessert came next, an enormous piece of chocolate cake with gooey frosting. Emma ate it all, every morsel, though her stomach felt bloated with the unaccustomed quantity. If she

didn't eat for the next couple of days, all would be well.

Julia strode over and stopped at their table. "I hate to see you both leave, but it's closing time. We're usually open later than this, but we had a usually large crowd, so we ran out of food." Her tone was apologetic.

"Of course." Emma and Charlie stood. People were saying goodnight and leaving. Charlie looked around and wore a satisfied grin Emma figured was from a full belly.

"I do hope you will come back tomorrow. We're serving chicken and rice."

"We'll be here." Charlie pushed in his chair.

"Thank you." Grateful, Emma smiled.

"Until tomorrow." With a hopeful expression on her face, Julia held out her hand.

Remembering the dirt beneath her own nails, Emma shoved her hands into her pockets.

Charlie shook Julia's clean hand in a big dirty paw.

Emma and Charlie stepped outside. The air held a hint of snow, though Halloween had just passed. Emma shivered. How was she to survive the cold November and brutal December when snow covered the ground?

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Doctor Jack Bradbury didn't believe in miracles or divine intervention. A man of science, he based his findings and

situations around him on facts.

Fact one: two months from today would mark the anniversary of his mother's recovery. Fact two: after being told prayers would help find her a heart, a heart was found. A coincidence. Nothing more. Not a fact: prayers did not make wishes come true. He knew that for certain. Four years ago, his heartfelt prayers were not answered when the love of his life left him. Fact three: the pain of loss still hurt like hell.

The ring of his cell phone jerked him out of his thoughts. He glanced at the display, and a little jolt of panic raced through him. "Mother, are you okay?" Knowing how crazy his days were, his mother rarely called him at work.

"I'm fine. Never mind me. How are you?"

Right. His mother was checking up on him. "Hanging in there. Plenty of patients to see to keep me busy." Busy or not, today's date hung over him like a rain cloud that followed him everywhere, despite his best effort to hurry through the day.

"Can you break for lunch?" Mom was just being mom, trying to distract him, being there for him when he needed uplifting.

Jack glanced at his apple watch. Noon. He flicked the watch to view his schedule. "Sure. I can meet you at one."

"Wonderful. How about Marabella's?"

That was his mother's favorite Italian restaurant. "I'll meet you there."

The squeak of rubber soles approaching from behind caught Jack's attention. "Doctor, you have a patient asking for you in room 222."

He glanced at Nurse Gelbur and nodded.

"Mom. I gotta go. Love you." He tapped his phone off.

Nancy handed him a clipboard with the names of his patients for the day.

Jack glanced at the list. Mrs. Keller was first up. "Got it. Thanks." He hurried to the elevator. The door opened and before he stepped in, a middle-aged man stepped out, nearly bumping into him.

"Oh, sorry," the man said, breathless. "First day here. I'm a bit lost and late."

"No worries. Where do you need to be?"

"I'm supposed to report to a Doctor Bradbury."

"Hey, you're in luck. That would be me."

"I'm Charlie. Your Physician's Assistant or so I'm told." He held out his hand.

"Welcome." Jack accepted the older man's quick, solid handshake.

Charlie's bright blue eyes had a light to them that seemed to draw him in.

"I'm on my way to see a patient. Since you're on today, I might as well put you to work."

"What's she in for," Charlie asked.

She? Had he said anything about his patient being a woman?

"Heart transplant. Mrs. Keller is a nice old lady, but she has a bite to her. So, don't say I didn't warn you."

"So noted." Charlie smiled.

They stepped inside the elevator. Jack pushed the second-floor button. He glanced at the man beside him. Pristine green scrubs, no wrinkles. Good first impression. He'd tucked his brown curly hair under a matching green cap. Clean fingernails, a must for anyone who worked on his staff. Good hygiene enhanced a sound well-being. He would tolerate nothing less.

The doors slid open. They stepped out into the empty hall, the only sound the tap of their footsteps. Jack reached room 222 and strode inside.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Keller." Jack stepped up to the bed. The years, with the help of extensive Botox treatments, had been kind to the seventy-year-old woman. Fine lines etched her forehead and creased her eyes, but high cheekbones, with very few dark spots, held firm against the pull of age. Dark hair, with very little gray he knew to be dyed, sat atop her head in a bun. Pearls adorned her neck and hung from her ears. In the four years she'd been his patient for heart issues, leading up to this week's procedure for a double valve replacement, never once had she been without rouge and red lipstick. Today was no

exception. "How are you feeling today?"

"Better now that my favorite doctor is here."

Jack gestured to Charlie. "This is my assistant. He's here to lend me a hand. Charlie, please check Mrs. Keller's vitals."

Jack braced himself as he observed the new guy get to work. Mrs. Keller, not the most cooperative patient, often belittled the staff. Most of the staff were afraid to go into her room. Her threats of suing them and shouts of their incompetence guaranteed a quick departure, and yet she seemed at ease as Charlie took her temperature and checked her blood pressure.

"Anything else, Doc?" Charlie asked.

"That will be all. You can wait for me in the hall."

Charlie left the room.

Any minute now, Mrs. Keller was going to give him an earful. Jack figured his presence held her tongue while Charlie was in the room.

"I like him."

Her words of praise threw him off his game. Jack stared at her, baffled.

"In fact, from now on, when I can't see you, I will only see him, and not those other so-called doctors that disturb me," she said with a dismissive wave.

"Mrs. Keller—"

"Renoir," she insisted. "All my friends call me by my first

name."

"Renoir. Charlie can't be your doctor. You know that's not possible. Jack scribbled a few medical notations on her chart, then slipped his pen into his white coat pocket.

"I'll pay him."

"That's not how it works, and you know that."

Renoir Keller came from money and built her own successful fashion company. Many stars wore her designs at the Oscars. But money wasn't everything. She never married and confessed to him she regretted her choice. A lonely old woman colored her mood swings. At times, he could relate. "What did you want to see me about?"

"I needed someone to talk to. Come." She patted the bed.  
"Sit."

Jack sat. "Only for a minute. I have other patients to see and a lunch date."

"Good for you! Is she a looker?"

"I'm having lunch with my mother."

"When are you going to start dating?" she said, her tone serious, her eyes locked on his.

He had no time for this nonsense. Jack stood. "Mrs. Keller—  
"

"Renoir."

"You know you're my favorite gal." He forced a smile,

hoping to appease her.

She frowned and swatted his hand. "I'm an old biddy. You need fresh meat."

"My freezer is quite full." Jack kept his tone light, but inside he cringed. Why did everyone feel the need to hook him up?

"Ah, I didn't take you for a ladies' man."

Jack let out an exasperated sigh. "My time is full with work and patients. Now. I'll check in on you before I leave tonight." He turned toward the door.

"I look forward to seeing you, and maybe you can send back that sweet PA, Charlie."

"I'll send him over to check in on you when we finish our rounds."

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The restaurant was humming with servers bussing tables, the clank of utensils against dishes, and chatter. Jack spotted his mother seated at a corner table. The red jacket she wore complimented her fair skin. As usual, not a strand of silver hair was out of place.

"Sorry, I'm late." He kissed her cheek, then sat opposite her.

"No worries. I'm enjoying a delicious glass of Pinot." She reached across the table and touched his hand. "How are you?"



"I'm fine."

"How are you really?" Concern colored her tone.

"Mother..." His eyes met hers. He hated the sadness he saw that sapped the energy from his otherwise energetic mother when she worried about him.

"Okay. Okay." She waved her hand with a dismissive gesture.

The server came over and handed them a menu. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Nothing for me. Thanks." Jack put down his menu. "But I'll have the chicken marsala."

"Make that two." His mother handed her menu to the young man, then turned her attention back to him. "It's been four years."

"I'm quite aware of that," Jack snapped, hoping she'd hear the frustration he felt. She didn't need to remind him how many years had passed since his wife's parting. He lived every year alone, felt the agonizing pain of loss on every anniversary.

"You need to get back out there."

"Not you too." Jack huffed and rubbed his temple. While he appreciated her concern and loved her because of it, why did she feel the need to constantly interfere with his life?

She straightened in her chair. "Did your sister say something?"

"No. A patient."

"Then it's obvious to everyone that you're lonely and need a life."

"I have my work." Jack loved his mother, but her persistence was giving him a headache. He wasn't some lonely bachelor who needed family members to set him up.

"Besides work." Exasperation lined his mother's forehead. "You heal everybody's heart. Don't you think it's time to heal your own?"

"My heart is just fine. I'm not interested in dating and not going to discuss this righ—"

"Here you go." The server brought over two steaming plates of chicken and pasta.

"Especially today." Jack leaned in close enough for his mother to hear his hushed voice. "On Chrissy's and my anniversary. Really?"

"You're right. I'll stop being motherly for today." She took a sip of white wine. "But I'm not giving up on you."

Jack picked up a knife and fork and meticulously cut into the chicken breast. "How's the hair business?" Mother wasn't going to stop interfering with his love life and, although that was her way of being concerned, he wished she'd just let well enough alone.

"Busy. I have a bridal party coming in on Saturday for hair and makeup. Look, you need to know something, and I'd rather it

came from me than your sister. And stop cutting that chicken like you're dissecting a heart."

Jack put down his utensils. "Sounds serious." The hesitancy he witnessed in her tone, on top of an already stressful day, aggravated his hiatal hernia, giving him heartburn.

"I'm spending my free time serving food in a soup kitchen."

"You're what?" Was she kidding? The burning in his chest intensified. He reached into his pocket, opened a bottle of Nexium, and popped a pill.

"Shhh." She leaned across the table. "Keep your voice down."

Not caring if the whole restaurant heard him, he continued. "Do you want to get yourself killed?" Was he the only one concerned for his mother's wellbeing? Did she not care she put herself in danger every time she went down to that desolate part of town? "I can't believe I'm hearing this. After all that happened."

His mother dotted her lips with her napkin. "Yes. After all that happened. This is my way of giving back. I just thank God—"

"Leave Him out of this." He inhaled sharply, then continued, his voice lower. "Where was God when that drug addict pulled my wife into an alleyway?" Jack's chair scraped the floor as he pushed away from the table and stood. If he didn't walk away soon, he'd say something he'd regret. "And now you're going

to the worst part of town to help the same bums she tried to rehabilitate." He was aware of the sudden silence in the room as those around him clung to his words.

His mother shook her head. "Not every homeless person is a drug addict or bad person."

"I gotta get some air but this conversation isn't over."

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A brisk wind blew strands of Charlie's long gray hair away from his face as he stood in front of the barrel of flames, warming his hands. The ratty gloves he wore didn't cover his fingertips, and he welcomed the heat on his frost-bitten skin. He could choose to let the cold overcome him or let it lift his spirit. He chose the latter.

Two men from the encampment stood beside him, holding their hands over the roaring fire.

Charlie glanced at them. "Good evening, gentlemen."

They acknowledged him with a nod.

"So, what's your story? Phil, right?" The man beside him wore a spittle-flecked, unkempt beard. His blond straw-like hair lay flat and dirty. His toil-worn face from the harsh exposure gave the appearance of one older than what Charlie suspected was about fortyish.

Phil speared him with a weary, suspicious gaze, then turned his attention back to the fire.

"Me. I was a gambler." Charlie felt embarrassed saying those words out loud. Gambling ruined his life.

"Yeah? Guessing that didn't turn out real well." Phil brought a brown paper bag up to his lips and took a sip from the bottle of booze concealed inside.

"When I scored big, I was sitting on top of the world," Charlie said. "Going home when I lost... not a pleasant scene."

"How'd you wind up here?"

Charlie recognized the deep voice. He lifted his gaze across the barrel to Jeffrey. His balance impaired, Jeffery leaned a little too close to the fire, trying to warm his chest. He had been a stockbroker who worked at the stock exchange, lived the good life, traveling, throwing money away as if his wallet was bottomless. Then, he made bad buys, lost his home, and found solace in the bottom of a glass bottle of just about any kind of alcohol he could find. He'd even confided to him he occasionally drank rubbing alcohol, knowing full well doing so could cause death.

Tugging his oversized blue jacket tighter across his chest, Charlie held the collar closer to his neck. "I worked in a bank right out of high school. Was thirty-five when the branch closed, and I was out of a job. I started working at a fancy Fifth Ave apartment as the doorman. Had a midlife crisis at forty-five. Life went downhill after that." Seeing how the rich

lived made him long for things beyond his means. He loved his wife, Rosie. She deserved the best of everything, and he wanted to give it to her. But his salary as a doorman didn't put her in the life he wanted her to be in.

"Cards?" Jeffery asked, his word slurred.

"Horses, then sports," Charlie confessed, feeling like a loser.

Gambling seemed like the best way to achieve the life he wanted, and for a long time, he was on a winning streak. When he won, he showered her with wonderful gifts, told her to buy anything she wanted, and she seemed happy. When she asked where the money came from, he told her he'd gotten a raise and great tips. But losing streaks were bad at home. They argued a lot, and he finally admitted he had an addiction to gambling and swore he'd stop. He remembered fighting over a diamond bracelet he bought her. She insisted he take it back, that no amount of money justified his gambling habit, and she was perfectly happy before all the gifts and extras he presented her with. Truth was, he felt guilty and a loser not providing for his family in the matter they deserved. His father moved from one job to another when laid off. He struggled to pay their bills and put food on the table. That's not what he wanted for his family. Desperate, he turned to easy money.

Acrid smoke billowed from the barrel. Charlie closed his

smoke-inflicted eyes and saw himself the day of his heart attack, stumbling backwards as she pleaded with him to get help. He argued he could stop at any time and didn't need to go to therapy. He recalled the knife-like pain in his chest cutting deeply. The fear that brought sweat to his brow. Her screams, as she frantically called 911. He'd clutched his heart, fell, and hit his head on the kitchen floor. A moment before the world went dark, he knew. Knew it was all over for him.

How was his family doing? Heart failure ran in his family. Did his son, Ian's future, hold the same fate as he did? Had Rosie moved on after he left them?

"Veteran. Gulf War." Phil tossed his paper bag to the ground. Glass shattered.

"PTSD. Drinking eased the nightmares." He wiped his face on his army jacket sleeve. "Drugs dull the pain."

Phil was one of the many veterans who couldn't cope and lived here. It was sad, really. These brave men fought for our country, some who did multiple tours of duty, and now faced this terrible fate. The wind's sharp bite stung his cheeks as Charlie stared up at the bright full moon. At times like this, he wondered about the Big Boss' reasoning, but who was he to ponder on this?

He moved away from the fire and stood in the shadows of the train trestle, close to where Emma slept. He knew about her past

from his boss, Ramiel. Emma's husband, despite his financial problems, spent his last forty dollars helping a little girl buy shoes for her grandmother; a good deed Charlie believed would not go unnoticed by the Big Boss above. Emma's husband never saw the taxi that struck him down.

Charlie glanced around, making sure no one noticed him, and slipped his phone from his pocket and tapped the keys. *Wheels in motion, he texted Ramiel. Emma met Julia. Side note: which should make the Big Boss happy. More than the usual count of homeless are going home with full bellies on All Saints' Day. I had to spread the word around the encampment. It was the only way to get Emma into the soup kitchen at such a late hour. Things going according to plan.*



## Chapter Two

Every night for the last three weeks, Charlie and Emma ate at the soup kitchen. The different array of meals was heavenly. Julia's friendly manner and warm smile made everyone feel welcome and at ease. Charlie's relaxed manner chased away Emma's initial fear of him, and she couldn't thank him enough for insisting they go there. Hope, once again, colored her world despite the darkness surrounding her.

The renewed sense drove her to change her circumstances no matter what it took. Today, as usual, Charlie disappeared and would show up at dinnertime. Emma didn't know where he went. When she asked him, his comment was, "you know, here and there." She missed his company. Having him around felt less lonely.

Like she did every morning, Emma washed her face and hands with one wet wipe, reserving her dwindling stash for as long as possible. She undid her single braid, then re-braided her hair, a routine she did to lessen the dirt and tangles, then she pulled out a different blouse and changed beneath her blanket. Standing, she shook out debris from her covering, folded her blanket, picked up her cardboard bed, and tucked her bedding into her suitcase. She hoped the city gym wasn't crowded today.

Though she tried to look inconspicuous whenever she'd entered the building, someone had always given her a once-over. No matter how clean she kept herself, her clothes looked slept in, and finding a place to wash them was near impossible.

A white and gray feral cat scampered by on the hunt for rodents, which suited her just fine. The more felines that lived under the train trestle, the better. One of her biggest fears, other than being attacked while she slept, was waking up covered in rats.

"Emma.

Recognizing Julia's voice, she looked toward the road where Julia had parked her car. What was she doing here?

"Can you help me?"

"Sure." Curious, Emma grabbed her belongings and hurried over. Julia opened the trunk. Inside, multiple gallon bottles of water filled the interior.

"How did you find us?"

"I've passed by here a few times."

"I'm not sure you should be here. It's not safe." Emma gnawed her lip. Trouble was always a stone's throw away. By now, she knew how to side-step it. Those first nights and days here caused her heart to jump in her throat, and her stomach to clench tight with every person who looked at her with an evil eye. People here didn't take too kindly to strangers.

"Nonsense," Julia said, her voice firm, final. "I thought I'd offer to cut and wash some hair today." She grabbed a black canvas bag full of towels.

"You're a hairdresser," Emma muttered with unease, fearing her presence would stir up trouble. Of course. Stupid comment.

"I own a shop about forty minutes from here." Julia opened the passenger side door and took out two large plastic wash pans filled with shampoo, brushes, and a cordless hairdryer. "Where should I set up?"

"Well... I..." Emma glanced around. "I try to stay away from the users. They usually congregate over there by that broken-down fence." The fence had a direct line to an alleyway. Should the cops show up, it was a quick getaway for dealers. The last thing she wanted was to put Julia in the worse section of the camp, even though the users were everywhere. Walking around camp was like walking through a minefield of discarded needles. Emma gnawed her lower lip. "Maybe by the overpass?" Despite the crowded, tented area under the train trestle, being there would be the safest place to set up shop. She knew the people who surrounded her living space and, seeing them together, she hoped no one would cause any problems.

"Great. Let's get started. Please grab the folding table."

A shudder of humiliation crept across Emma's skin with every step, bringing them closer to where she rested her head

each night. What did Julia think? Was she appalled by the crooked shanties, the crowded living conditions lining the trestle walls, and the filth all too familiar? Did the horrid stench turn her stomach like it had done hers those first days?

As they went to work setting up the table, lining up the water containers and basins, Emma's gaze darted from Julia to those huddled in their homes, and she prayed today no fights would break out, no drunks would stumble past them, and no strung-out addict would fall at their feet.

Julia didn't appear to be alarmed or uneasy. She went about her task as though she were setting up in a fancy salon, lining up the shampoos and conditioners in a single line, arranging brushes and scissors neatly side by side. Her relaxed stance eased the tension from Emma's neck and cooled her heated cheeks.

Curious bystanders watched with trepidation, gaunt expressions, and chattered in hushed suspicious tones, not trusting the strange woman who certainly had an agenda they feared would alert the authorities.

"How about I start with you?" Julia asked as she poured water into a rubber basin.

Heat crept up Emma's neck. Clean hair would feel heavenly and welcomed, but the embarrassment she felt reminding her of her plight stabbed her chest. Being on the receiving end of charity cemented her reality.

Julia must have sensed her hesitation. She placed her hand over Emma's and smiled. "Maybe the others will come if you go first."

Emma nodded. She leaned over the wash bucket. Cool water brought goosebumps to her arms.

"I'm sorry it's not hot."

"This feels wonderful. Thank you." Hot or cold didn't matter. Julia massaged Emma's scalp with a fragrant shampoo that smelled like coconut and sweet flowers. She closed her eyes. Her body relaxed as she gave into the tranquil sensations easing away the dirt and grime, and for the moment made her forget where she was.

Her long hair trimmed, feeling clean for the first time in days, Emma watched as people ambled over and stood eager to be next in line.

"Emma. Do you think perhaps you might help wash hair? The line might go faster."

"Absolutely." Thrilled to help, Emma tossed out the soapy water and refilled the basin with the clean liquid.

Together, they spent the next three hours making the people of the encampment feel a bit more dignified than when they woke up that morning.

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Jack looked forward to enjoying a delicious Thanksgiving

meal. Not big into cooking, he ate takeout most nights. His mother's homemade cornbread stuffing was the best, and he couldn't wait to dig in, sit back, and enjoy the company of his mom and his sister's family. Donna had done right by marrying Bill. They'd been happily married for fifteen years. Bill was a great addition to the family, a good guy who treated his sister with respect and love. Everyone, including himself, doted on their daughter Annamarie, who, at nine years old, was growing into quite a young lady.

He parked his car in front of his mother's brick house, pushed open his door and got out. Crisp, cool air wafted across his face. Heavy gray clouds crept across the sky. Threatening snow clouds that weren't there when he left his apartment earlier. He probably should have taken the subway and not his vintage car.

Jack opened the trunk, pulled out a car cover slammed the trunk closed then stretched the canvas over his car. Satisfied his baby would be protected from the harsh weather, he strode up the brick paved walkway leading to the front steps.

The front door flew open before he reached for the knob.

His sister stood blocking his way. "I need to talk to you."

"Hello to you too, Sis. Can I get inside first?"

Donna frowned, then with a swift sideways and upward glance back at him, she stepped aside, grabbed his arm, dragged him

into the study, and closed the French doors for privacy.

"What's going on?" Jack's gaze met his sister's serious brown eyes. She had their father's eyes, he thought, as he stared at her. And his wavy dark hair, but their mother's slender build that right now looked like a coiled spring about to bounce.

"We have a surprise guest for dinner." Her voice had a nervous shrill to it, setting off alarms in Jack's head.

"Don't tell me mother has set me up again."

"No. It's not like that—"

"So..." What could be so distressing to put such a concerned expression on his sister's face?

"You won't be happy. I wanted to give you a heads up."

"Just tell me already." He huffed.

"You know, mom. Well..." Donna averted his gaze.

"Just spit it out."

She looked back at him for a brief second, then stepped back as though expecting him to blow up, which shot up his blood pressure. "She invited a homeless woman to dinner."

"She what?"

Donna grimaced. "Keep your voice down. They'll hear you."

Jack threw up his hands and paced. "This is ridiculous. She's gone too far this time. First serving food and now strangers invading our home. Dirty ones at that. I'll not stand

for it." Did their conversation at the restaurant mean anything to her? He'd been perfectly clear about the perilous threat imposed by homeless addicts and drunks. They'd all witnessed the danger firsthand.

His sister's hand slammed down on his arm, stopping him from pushing the study doors open. "Don't be a jerk and make a scene. And she's not dirty. She took a shower in Mom's bathroom."

"Great. Just great." He jammed his fingers into the back of his neck, easing the knots. Trying to digest his sister's words, he shook his head, his gaze fixed through the glass doors for his mother's guest. If she so much as pilfered a spoon, he'd throw her out onto the street regardless of his mother's protests.

"Please," Donna pleaded. "For Mom's sake."

"What if this woman is a thief, or drinks too much and gets unruly? Is that what your daughter needs to see?"

Donna's hand went to her hips. "She probably weighs about a hundred pounds. Tackling her shouldn't be a problem," she said with heavy sarcasm. "And Mom's an excellent judge of character."

"Fine." Jack took a calming breath. "But I don't have to like it, or her."

"Just be nice."

"I'm always nice." He didn't mean to sound so sarcastic,



but his mother's guest hit a raw sore spot in his heart.

The sound of his niece's laughter filled the study as Jack opened the door and Annamarie rushed in.

"Here's my favorite niece." Jack planted a kiss on her forehead.

"I'm your only niece," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

Her words stabbed his heart. Having a child hadn't been in the cards for Christine and him.

Annamarie gestured for him to bend down. She leaned in close to his ear. "There's a woman in our house."

"I know," he whispered, trying hard to keep the annoyance out of his tone.

"Mom says she doesn't have a home. We should let her stay here."

*Heavens no.* Jack straightened. "Where is your grandmother?"

"In the kitchen," Donna chimed in.

Jack's neck felt like it might lock. Didn't his mother realize inviting a stranger to her house was foolish? Placed her family at risk? What if buttering up to his mother was a way for her to take advantage of his mother's good graces or... He took a deep breath, relaxing his shoulders and turned to his niece.

"I say we go over there and see if we can steal one of your grandma's famous chocolate chip cookies."

Annamarie nodded, turned and Jack hurried after her through

the living room. As she disappeared under the archway leading into the kitchen, a woman exited the bathroom, her hand clenched at her side. She glanced around, refusing to make eye contact with him, then nervously shifted on her feet.

What the hell was she hiding? Had she stolen one of his mother's prescriptions? Jack rushed over and grabbed her arm.

"Let go of me." She jerked her arm, trying to loosen his hold, but he held firm.

"What do you have in your hand?" His gaze flew to the bathroom. "Did you? Hell no." He tugged her into the bathroom and, with his free hand, flipped open the medicine cabinet. His mother's heart medication, along with sleeping pills and various bottles of pain medicine, lined the shelf. Nothing seemed to be missing.

"You're hurting me." The woman beside him yanked down her arm, breaking contact. "You think I'm a user? That I'd steal from Julia?" Anger flashed in her eyes. She pushed up her wrist-length sleeves, exposing her thin arms. "You see any needle marks?"

He didn't, but that meant nothing. "What are you hiding?" In the tight space, a delightful flowery smell of shampoo wafted toward him distracting him.

She opened her hand. Nestled in her palm was a chain and gold pendant with the image of an angel engraved on it. "It

broke."

It had indeed. As his taut stance eased, he noticed her eyes were the color of honey. "I apologize. I just—"

"Right, I get it. Homeless thief, or drug addict. Do you want to smell my breath to make sure I'm not a drunk as well? Should I take off my shoes so you can check for needle marks between my toes?" she said sarcastically.

Her words were as direct as a bullet and sent a pang of guilt to his chest.

"Wow." She grimaced, stared at him with disdain. "I'm leaving."

As much as he didn't want some stranger invading their home, she was his mother's guest, and sending her packing wouldn't go over well. "That won't be necessary." He pointed to the hallway. "After you."

She stepped into the hall, her posture rigid.

His mother stepped from the kitchen. "What was all that racket? Jack? Emma?"

"A misunderstanding," Emma replied with a forced smile. "I think... I made a mistake coming here." She moved toward the living room and the door.

"Jack," his mother barked. "What did you do?"

Emma turned. "He did nothing. I just don't want to intrude. It was most kind of you but—"

"But nothing." Jack strode over. "You're not intruding." Why hadn't she ratted him out? Guilt twisted his gut. He'd jumped to a conclusion. That wasn't like him, or maybe it was to a small degree. The past had a way of coloring his view.

She studied him with narrow eyes, then shrugged. "Okay. Thanks."

"Now that that's settled. Dinner is being served. Jack, please escort our guest," his mother emphasized the word guest, "to the dining room."

Not wishing to cause a further scene, palm up, he pointed toward the room next to the kitchen. "This way."

His mother had placed seating cards on the turkey-designed plates. Donna, her husband, and Annamarie ambled around to find their names. True to his mother's interference in his life, Emma was seated next to Jack. He pulled out her chair. Her surprised gaze met his. Just because he didn't want her here didn't mean he'd forgotten his manners. She took a seat. As he sat, he caught his mother's approving smile.

Jack took a slice of turkey, then passed the platter to Emma. He wondered when she'd eaten last and expected her to pile food onto her plate, but surprisingly she only took a small piece of white meat.

"Hey, big brother, stop ogling our guest and pass the yams."

Jack's attention snapped to his sister. "I will if you pass the cranberries." Every year, Donna made the cranberry and pineapple dish, which tasted just as delicious the next day, out of the fridge.

When everyone's dish was piled high with potatoes, green bean casserole, turkey, and cornbread, Jack lifted his glass of wine. "To family."

"To family," everyone said, except Emma, who was studying her plate, a plate he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, had a small helping of yams and casserole alongside her turkey. Seeing the small portion made him feel like he'd over done his serving size, one he'd regret later when they all sat on the couch with full bellies and feeling like that stuffed bird.

He turned to Emma. "So, how did you wind up on the street?"

His sister kicked him under the table. He glanced at her. "What? I'm just curious. I'm sure we all are."

Donna smirked, then forked a potato.

"You don't have to answer that," Julia said, spearing him with a sharp glare.

Emma put down her glass. "After my husband—"

"You're married? Why isn't he with you?" Jack was right not to trust her. Was this some scheme? She cases the house. Then he steps in when his mom was asleep? He speared Donna a glance, raised his eyebrows as if to say I told you so.

"He's dead."

Emma's flat tone and the pain in her eyes stabbed his chest. "Sorry to hear that."

"We all are," his sister chimed in, then wrinkled her nose at him. Okay, so he was wrong.

"I lost my home. Have no family. End of story." Emma's gaze fell.

Was that a tear in her eye? "Sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable." Damn, he felt like a heel.

"I'm sure you didn't."

He could tell by the slight sarcasm in her voice she thought differently.

She cut through a slice of turkey and took a bite. "Julia, this is delicious. Thanks again for your kindness." She shot Jack a disdainful glance before continuing with her meal, one he guessed he deserved for thinking the worst of her.

The rest of the dinner was the usual talk of how the week went and the upcoming holiday preparations.

Throughout the evening, Jack found his attention settling on Emma. How did she manage in the filthy environment she called home? What was the complete story behind her current situation? He was aware of the struggles the homeless faced. Men and women littered the New York City streets. They slept in every step or corner they could find. They went through garbage cans for food

and bottles to exchange for cash. Where did she sleep? In a shelter? On the street? How did she bathe? The ER constantly gave out wipes to help with hyenine. Showers were available. He didn't recall seeing her there. How did she survive such a horrid lifestyle with all the delinquents on the street who threatened to rob or cut someone's throat to get their fix? Survival of the fittest, that was the saying. For one with such a small physique, she must be one tough woman.

"So, Emma, Christmas is a big deal in Mom's house." Donna's ecstatic tone drew him from his thoughts. "It pretty much takes over." She piled some green bean casserole on her plate.

"We make cookies and gingerbread houses," Annamarie said with excitement.

"Jack, do you think this year you'll decorate your apartment?" Donna regarded him with a wry smile.

He shot her a surly glare. "Not planning on it." He was tiring of their continued push of Christmas. The holiday was painful for him, and they knew it.

"A few decorations of cheer won't kill you," his mother added.

"I get all the cheer I need when I come here." Jack shifted his gaze to Emma, who quietly pushed the food around on her plate, then shifted in her seat.

"You don't have to sound sarcastic," Donna snapped. "We are

just trying to help."

"Thanks, I'm good." Jack forked some green beans. "Do you think we can just eat? Mom..." He raised his fork. "Delicious casserole, as usual."

"Thank you." She smiled.

The clank of utensils against dishes, the "can you please pass the yams", and an occasional groan of pleasure eased the tension in the room. When the conversation turned to what Annamarie was reading, Emma perked up.

He glanced at her nonchalantly. She wasn't what he expected. Her appearance, one of soft-spoken intelligence, was apparent in her discussion with Donna about literature and art. Her occasional smile, not unpleasing, had melancholy to it as though she couldn't bring herself to fully enjoy the moment.

He inhaled the sweet smell of her freshly washed blond hair. A flowery aroma...lavender. Her attention focused on Donna, Emma was unaware of his scrutiny as he continued his analysis. Her sun and wind-weathered tan accented the warm brown tones in her eyes. High hollow cheekbones, narrow jaw, thin frame due to lack of proper nutrition, that he expected. She spoke her mind and wasn't intimidated by him—unexpected. What he didn't expect was the tug and pull that had him constantly assessing her.

Bill said, "Did you see those altocumulus clouds earlier? A



winter storm is coming."

Bill's comment pulled Jack from his observation. His brother-in-law's hobby was meteorology. His dream job of being a weatherman on some TV station vanished when Annamarie was born, and he stayed at his accounting firm, but that didn't stop him from checking all the internet weather sites.

"Snow?" Annamarie jumped out of her chair and ran to the window. "It's snowing."

Bill smiled, pleased by his assessment and his daughter's enthusiasm.

Donna had that anxious look of, oh no. A snow day. No school. Shoot me now.

Jack glanced at Emma. Her bleak expression and fixed gaze on the window appeared as if she'd crawled into herself, shutting out everyone at the table. Was she thinking about the cold, the snowstorm? Surely, she'd lived through other storms and found a warm bed in some city shelter.

### Chapter Three

Emma watched the blizzard-like snow rapidly falling outside the window adjacent to her seat in the dining room. Depression and anxiety clawed her stomach into shreds. While the others in the room saw the start of the Christmas season and envisioned snowball fights and snowmen, she saw herself huddled beneath her one blanket, wearing layers of clothing beneath her coat, and shivering despite her best efforts.

When Julia had suggested she come for dinner, Emma declined. Not that a home-cooked meal wouldn't be welcomed but sitting with a bunch of people she didn't know and having them judge her made her stomach turn.

Telling these strangers about her life made her feel rootless and demoralized. But if she gave into those feelings, they would mess with her head. For all Julia's kindness, she deserved the truth, no matter how painful. But the hostile looks Jack shot her were like tattoo needles against her spine and not worth the price of a meal. How could someone as kind as Julia have such a pig-headed, judgmental son? "I should get going before it gets worse out there." The thought of leaving the warm, cozy room made Emma's legs feel immobile as she stood.

Jack pushed back his chair and stood beside her. "I'll get your coat."

Could he say the words any faster? He couldn't wait to get rid of her. Emma held back her grimace. Her fake smile felt as frozen as the snow-covered ground. "Thank you."

"Nonsense," Julia declared. "You can't possibly sleep out in the cold in this storm. You will stay the night here."

"Mother." Jack scowled.

Emma's gaze flew from Julia's determined stance to Jack's unblinking stare.

"I whole-heartedly agree," he said. "But there are shelters for..."

"Jack. Go ahead," Emma sputtered, bristling with indignation. "Say it. For beggars like me." She'd tried living in a shelter. But staying there was more dangerous than living on the street. The overwhelmed, poorly trained staff turned a blind eye to theft and personal attacks. Life inside a hundred-bed single room building was too chaotic. The turnover of people made feeling safe impossible. After three days of witnessing fights over beds, stolen phones, and arguments, she'd had enough of shelters. At least living at the encampment, people knew each other and chose to make a permanent home there. Right now, she'd rather be out in the cold than staring into the narrow judgmental eyes of a man who clearly wanted her gone.

Julia's gaze bounced from Emma to her son, then fell to her plate. Donna cleared her throat. Annamarie moved from the window and stopped at her father's side. The tension in the room felt brittle, about to snap.

The attention focused on her heated Emma's cheeks She clenched her hands, annoyed this wonderful dinner had been sabotaged by a man who looked at her as though she were dirt under his feet. She stared at Jack, waiting for his next callous remark. He squinted at her through hardened eyes, and if she wasn't aware of the tense muscles in his face communicating his intense mistrust and contempt, she may have berated him again. *For Julia's sake*, she said to herself and swallowed her anger. *For Julia's sake*, she'd keep her cool.

"I was going to say for this very reason; that's why there are shelters to house those in need," he mumbled.

Emma fixed on his eyes, wondering on the truth of his words, and saw his serenity. Her ridged stance eased. She hated to get so defensive, and felt bad about her snappy comment, but people judged the homeless by their appearance, thinking of them as vandals and worthless. Did they ever pause to think there might be a story behind why they lived on the streets that had nothing to do with alcoholism or drug addiction? It was obvious by the chip on his shoulder and his kneejerk reaction when he thought her a user, and despite her explanation earlier on how

she found herself in dire straits, he still found her circumstance distasteful.

Julia broke the tension. "I know for a fact the shelters in this area are completely full. The forecast of a storm fills up vacancies quickly. First come, first cot. This is my home. I say who stays and who goes."

Emma wrung her hands together. "I couldn't possibly sta—"

"You will stay the night," Julia said. "I will not take no for an answer."

Waiting for Jack to protest, Emma observed him with a critical squint. The corners of his mouth twisted with exasperation. Then, to her surprise, he strode past her and stopped at his mother's side.

"Before it gets worse out there, I should head home. He bent down and kissed her cheek. "Good night." He pivoted, marched into the hall, grabbed his coat from the closet, and let the front door close behind him with a thud.

Emma let out a slow, controlled breath, attempting to dissolve the tense ball lodged in the middle of her chest.

The room came alive. Everyone got up and started cleaning off the table. Utensils clanked against dishware. Bill grabbed his glass of Pinot Grigio and swallowed the remaining wine with a gulp. Donna shot her a sympathetic look before she turned and headed for the kitchen, with Annamarie trailing after her.

"I will show you to your room. This way." Julia headed for the stairs.

Emma paused at the entrance to the kitchen. "I should help clean—"

"Nonsense." Julia stopped at the bottom step. "You are a guest and no guest of mine cleans up. That's why I have children. Remind me later to give my son a piece of my mind."

They continued up the stairs in silence. The brittle tension tightening Emma's shoulders eased with each step, bringing her farther away from the grime and despair of the frigid street she'd thought she'd be sleeping on. This had to be a dream, for no one could be so lucky.

"Here you go." Julia opened the door and stepped inside.

Emma followed. Her eyes rounded as she took in the welcoming bedroom. Soft blue walls gave the room a calm feeling. A queen-sized white sleigh bed sat on a gray and white square-patterned woven rug. Four small framed pictures of flowers hung over the bed, sheer curtains, and floor to ceiling gray draperies covered the window.

Tears of gratitude welled in her eyes. "Thank you for the kindness you have shown me. First, the shower and clean clothes, a wonderful dinner, and now this..." Emma gestured around the room. "Thank you feels like such a small word."

Julia smiled and patted Emma's arm. "I will be back with a

nightgown and toiletries. Make yourself comfortable."

Emma stared. Hesitant. A dream, she thought again. She pinched her arm. Nope. The realization gave her the momentum to move. She ambled over to the bed and ran her fingers over the white-flowered bedspread printed with soft lavender and bluebells. Afraid to sit, afraid she would never want to get out of bed if she dared lie down, she strode over to the window and pushed the curtains aside.

The snow was coming down fast and furious, coating the ground and trees. She used to love walking in the snow at night; loved the silence as the snow flurried down, and all she heard was the sound of her footsteps crunching the earth; loved the cold yet gentle feel of flakes kissing her cheek and eyelashes as she'd look up to the lamplights and dark sky. Now all she felt was fear. Fear she might not survive the cold; fear she wouldn't live to see the new growth of spring.

Charlie came to mind. Was he okay? Had he found a warm place in a shelter to rest his head? Did he go to the soup kitchen? Was it open? She chewed her nail. Meeting Charlie was a blessing that led to this beautiful home and to a kind woman who gave her a place to rest her head for the night. When she saw him again, she would thank him profusely and recall this moment when she felt down about her circumstances. Remembering would lift her spirit and give her renewed strength to make it through

another grueling day.

"Here you go." Julia's presence jarred her from her thoughts.

Emma whirled around. "Is Saint Ann's open today?"

"Yes. It's open. I believe turkey dinners are being served as we speak."

"Oh. I'm glad." Charlie probably wondered where she was. She hoped he wasn't worried. People came and went without notice. Maybe he didn't give her another thought. At least he'd be enjoying a good meal. At least she hoped so. Julia's invitation to come to Thanksgiving dinner came so suddenly she didn't have time to tell him. She'd been taken-aback. Stunned by Julia's insistence. Not sure she'd heard correctly, it took her a moment, then she gladly accepted, touched by her kindness.

Julia placed the folded nightgown and robe on the bed, along with a toothbrush, toothpaste, and hairbrush. "I'll leave these here."

"I don't know how to thank you enough." More tears formed in the corner of Emma's eyes. How had she gotten so lucky? She sniffled, and with the back of her hand, wiped her face.

"No, thanks necessary. And I must apologize for my son's behavior. This isn't his favorite time of year."

"Mine either." Guess they had that in common. That devastating Christmas eve left a scar on her heart and spiraled



her life downhill. The devastation of that dreadful night still haunted her dreams.

"He's usually not so gruff, and once you get to know him, he's a good guy," Julia insisted, love clear in the softness of her voice and the concern in her eyes begging Emma to believe her.

"I'm sure he is." The words felt like sawdust on her tongue.

"Well..." There was a hesitance to Julia's stance, as though she wanted to add to the conversation. "I'll leave you be. Sleep well."

"Thank you."

Julia made her way to the door.

"Julia."

She turned, her hand on the doorframe. "Yes."

"Thank you for not judging me. For not seeing me as a lo—" Emma's voice broke miserably. "Loser."

"Oh, honey," Julia said softly, her expression somber. "No one sees you like that."

Jack came to mind.

Emma swallowed the lump in her throat brought on by Julia's compassionate tone. "I wish that were true."