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SAVING EMMA

by

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Saving Emma

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Cover Art by Kim Mendoza

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 706

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History:

Previously published by Whiskey Creek Press, 2005

First Crimson Rose Edition, 2010

Print ISBN 1-60154-732-3

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Alan, my husband of thirty-three years—thanks for all your patience, encouragement, and cooking dinner when there were deadlines to be met.

Thanks also to Bob Reynard—author of the Secret Code Breaker series of books—for his crash course on the intricacies of codes and how to break them, and making sure I used the correct technical jargon.

And last, but certainly not least, thanks to my darling parents for their support and undying enthusiasm. Sadly, they are no longer with us except in our hearts and memories.

Chapter 1

What had they done to deserve this, Emma Larkin wondered as she sat on Sally's bed assessing the damage. The padded headboard had been slashed, clothes hung out of drawers, even the toy box had been up-ended.

"I thought we'd get away from all this," she said, more to herself than to her four-year-old daughter.

Tears slowly trickled down her face as she picked up Sally's music box, trying to put the broken toy back together.

What they'd do now, she had no idea. The local police had been of no help. This was way out of their league, and Emma left what little family she had back in Melbourne.

She had absolutely no one to turn to.

The move to the countryside was a last ditch effort to get their lives back on track. All this upheaval had achieved very little Emma decided.

"Don't cry, Mummy," the little girl told her, reaching out to give her mother a hug. "We can clean up the mess, and Uncle Coop will fix the music box if I ask him."

Sally planted a big sloppy kiss on her mother's cheek before settling herself comfortably on Emma's lap.

"Four days in a new town, a new home, and already..." Emma quietly sobbed.

Life had changed dramatically since her husband's murder two years ago.

"But mummy, I liked that house," Sally said, pouting. "Why did we have to move again?"

Emma sighed, but explained patiently, "The bad people found us again, Sally. We couldn't stay there any longer."

Sally thought about it for a moment. "So does that mean the bad people can't find us now? Can we stay here forever?" Sally looked to her mother for reassurance. "I like this place. Please can we stay? Please?"

"Sure," Emma answered. "We'll stay. We'll make it so they can't find us again." Emma smiled at Sally with renewed confidence.

This large country town was the answer to their prayers she was sure. She'd been so wrong in choosing

small towns before. It was too hard to hide—everyone knew everyone. But Bairnsdale was large enough that they would blend in. Their arrival wouldn't even be noticed.

And the brown hair dye was a nice touch, she decided. There was nothing like flaming red hair to make a person stand out.

Taking a long drag on his cigarette, Gary Bedford sat on the steps of the Rotunda at the Main Street Gardens in Bairnsdale.

Between assignments, his favorite past time was to come to these gardens and watch the local talent.

Women didn't seem to go much for cops. And undercover cops? That was a whole different story. Gone for weeks on end depending on the assignment, finding himself in dangerous or life threatening situations—chicks just don't go for it.

Naturally there'd been the occasional girlfriend, but they never seemed to work out. They just didn't like his life-style. And when they found out his two brothers were private investigators, that was the absolute end. His family was fraught with danger—that's what

one girl told him. So at thirty-two, Gary was still single and not entirely unhappy about the situation.

Life as an undercover cop wasn't easy.

Smoke drifted from his cigarette as Gary watched a small girl running along the lush grass with a twenty-something babe close on the young girl's heels. The bountiful flowerbeds scattered among the trees provided a colorful backdrop. He looked the young woman over more thoroughly as she came toward him.

Her skin seemed pale against her long brown hair, and her above average height accentuated her long legs. As the wind came up, her white over-shirt flapped open revealing a scarlet tank top and a pair of black bike-shorts.

Families picnicked, children played and dogs barked while adults talked or just relaxed. Gary had seen days like this before, but today he was oblivious to everything else as he watched the young woman's disheveled hair drift about in the warm breeze.

He stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette on the step and stumbled down the steps of the Rotunda.

“Oh boy,” he scolded himself as he collided heavily with the young woman.

She gasped for breath after having the wind knocked out of her by the impact. She grabbed his shirtfront trying to get her balance.

How could he have been so damned careless, he wondered. The object of his attention scowled at him as he reached out trying to steady her, but she flicked his hands away. He watched helplessly as she bent forward, her hands on her knees, still gasping for air.

Gary silently observed her eyes scanning his body. From experience, he knew the first thing she'd notice would be his unusual height. Six foot five got everyone's attention. He reached up and ran his hand over his chin. Damn! He hadn't shaved this morning—today, of all days. At least he'd tied his hair back in a ponytail.

She stared into his eyes. Hers narrowed with rage while she checked him out. Her eyes slid to his open denim shirt, lingered on his chest before sliding down, momentarily settling on his belly, and then drifted to his crotch. Damn her—she even checked out his... Nah, she wouldn't do that—would she?

Her appraisal continued, focusing on his jeans— his threadbare jeans. He groaned inwardly. Why did he have to dress like a slob on his days off? At least he wore his cowboy boots...

Gary looked down. Oh God, thongs!

He felt a gentle pummeling on his legs. "Look what you did, you big bully," a small voice said.

He looked down, way down, at the child. "Sorry, I didn't mean..." He leaned toward the winded woman.

The little girl began to kick at his ankles. He reached down, picking her up with one hand and said, "Okay Squirt, that's enough. Your auntie's all right." His eyebrows rose quizzically as he looked the older female over. "You are, aren't you?" he asked as an afterthought.

"Make the giant put me down!" the child squealed.

"Take your damned hands off my daughter!" the woman yelled, still slightly breathless but now angry. Gary realized she had only now become aware of the situation.

"You're her mother?" He let out an audible sigh of disappointment, put the brown haired child down, and

extended his hand to the now recovered woman standing in front of him.

Gary watched silently as she stood unmoving, pushing the child behind her. Her actions puzzled him.

He noticed an involuntary shiver go through her body as he contemplated her.

Reaching forward he picked up her delicate hand, and noticed her blue eyes widen. Was she afraid of him?

A shot of pure electricity ran up his arm as their hands connected. Did she cause that thrill or was it his imagination?

"Gary Bedford," he said as his eyes leisurely roamed her body. When she pulled her shirt around herself, he unexpectedly felt guilty.

"Well, Gary Bedford, I hope you have a very good reason for almost knocking me off my feet." Her words were more positive than her voice.

"I sure have, Miss, er, Mrs., er..." "This better be good!"

He could only imagine the expression on his face as he tried to withhold a smirk. "I, er, that is..."

She straightened her back, planted her feet firmly. Oh yeah, she was ready to rip into him. "Out with it! Why did you knock me over?"

She may have sounded brave, but Gary could see the terror written all over her face. She confused him.

"I, er, wanted to meet you. But I didn't mean to run over you. It was an accident."

She followed his gaze to their still entwined hands. He was even more puzzled as she quickly withdrew her hand then backed off.

Gary watched fascinated by the variety of expressions crossing her face. Maybe it was anger, annoyance, or fear? Whatever he saw, he decided to stall her premature departure.

"I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?"

She stood planted to the spot, her mouth pulled into a tight little line, obviously planning to ignore Gary's question.

"Mister. Hey, Mister!"

Gary looked down to see the little girl innocently looking up at him.

"My mummy is Emma Larkin. And I'm..."

"James. My name is James," Emma quickly added, frowning at the child.

What the hell is this all about he wondered. James? Larkin?

"Larkin..." He tried to remember where he'd heard the name before, but the little girl's protest interrupted his thoughts.

"Mummy, I don't like our pretend name."

"Really, Sally! What have I told you about strangers?" She grabbed Sally by the hand, pulling the child closer.

He watched mesmerized as the wind sent Emma's hair sailing across her agitated face. He reached out and untangled the wayward hair from her lips. A frisson of excitement trickled through him as his fingers gently brushed against her cheek.

She took a step back.

Belatedly he realized he'd overstepped the mark. "I'm sorry. I guess your husband wouldn't be very happy..."

"I'm not m..." Her expression revealed she had said more than she intended.

"You're not married?" Calm down boy. Don't get carried away. "I thought... Never mind. How about dinner? There are lots of places to choose from.

There's AJ's or the Terminus. Or maybe you'd prefer to go to the Coliseum?" You're babbling, Bedford.

"No, sorry. I don't do dinner. Come on, Sal."

"You don't do dinner? Of course you do. We all have to eat." Gary stubbornly refused to back down.

The dead-end conversation made him—frustrated.

He was getting nowhere fast. Right or wrong, he wanted to know Emma Larkin. Or was it James?

The lady positively thrilled him, intrigued him, touching a part of him no one else ever had. He needed to know, wanted to know, what made her click. "Maybe I didn't make it clear. You can bring the Squirt."

"I wouldn't dream of going anywhere without her. The answer is still no." Emma looked about her nervously, making Gary sure she was about to bolt.

Sally began tugging on her mother's shirt-tail to get her attention. "Mummy, Mummy. Is he a good giant or a bad one?" The child had a scowl on her face.

This was some feisty kid he decided.

"I'm not sure, Sal, a good one, possibly. Mr. Bedford has invited us out for dinner."

His heart skipped a beat. "Does that mean, yes?"

The child's eyes lit up. "Can we go to McDonalds? Can we? Can we?"

"Sally, No! Mind your manners. I'm sure Mr. Bedford doesn't want to go to McDonalds."

He liked Sally. She reminded him of his nieces.

She had spunk, and she certainly wasn't afraid to speak her mind.

"The name's Gary, remember? And if you're happy with Macca's, then so am I."

He smiled, and Emma took another step back, pulling Sally along with her. He took one forward.

"I, I didn't say we'd go..." Emma said, sounding very unsure of herself and taking two more backward steps as she spoke.

This sure was one confused woman.

"But you said..." he started, and then reassessed the situation. He prided himself on being pretty good at reading people's faces and their reactions. He had to be, it went with the territory. In this case, Emma acted scared, real scared. But why?

He decided to take a step back, figuratively speaking. "You're right. You didn't actually agree to go out with me..." He let the words trail off, then waited for her reaction.

He watched her fight with herself, trying to decide what to do. As her pretty face screwed up in a frown, he wanted to reach out and stroke her forehead...sooth, smooth.

Gary gazed down at his ankles. The kicking had started again. "Listen, Squirt..."

"You made my Mummy sad. You are a bad giant! And my name's Sally, not Squirt."

Without warning, Emma grabbed Sally by the hand and quickly walked away. Gary decided he had to do something, and fast, otherwise he might lose her before he'd even had a chance. He reached out and caught Emma by the wrist, softly pulling her back to him.

Without warning, he dropped to his knees on the grass.

"Miss Larkin, um, James, would you do me the honor of accompanying myself and the Squirt, er, Sally, to dinner at McDonalds this evening?"

The smirk appeared again, he was sure of it. Surely, she couldn't refuse such an invitation?

"Can I go to the playground now?" Sally asked as she slurped the last mouthful of her chocolate thick shake.

"Okay, Sal, off you go," her mother answered. She stood as the child skipped away. Gary caught her lightly around the waist, only to have his hands flicked away.

"Where are you off to?" he asked grimly, bringing his hands back up around her waist. This had to be the strangest date he'd ever been on.

"To supervise Sal on the equipment of course! You're welcome to join us." She pulled herself free of his gentle grip and followed Sally out to the play area.

Emma stood with her back to him, but it didn't discourage Gary one iota. He was determined not to let Emma Larkin, James, whatever, whoever, slip through his fingers.

He quietly moved forward and lightly wrapped his arms around her. They fit together like a glove. Emma tried to shake herself free of him, which made Gary even more determined to keep a grip.

She lifted her hands, surprising him. He expected her to shove him away. Instead gripping his strong arms, she sank back into his lean body, as though her life depended on him.

Gary reveled in her nearness, sensing her ongoing battle with her conscience, her decision to let him get close to her. He'd no sooner feel her relax than she'd pull away again. It seemed she wanted to be comfortable with him, but feared the risk she could ill afford.

Even more perplexing, she'd insisted they meet there. What was she afraid of? Him? He'd sensed something from the second they met.

He needed to know, wanted to know, more about this new lady in his life.

Gary leaned toward her neck. The gentle fragrance she wore drifted into his nostrils. The scent was familiar.

Lavender? His mother had a lavender bush he literally had to walk past to get through her front door.

The scent was definitely lavender, he finally decided. The fragrance suited her—soft and gentle.

He felt Emma shudder as his lips made contact.

“Don’t push your luck,” she said lightly-heartedly. “I don’t think neck nibbling is on the first date agenda.”

He chuckled at the gentle teasing she employed.

“Really? I don’t think McDonalds is either, but here we are.”

A determined jerking on his trouser leg disturbed him. “Mr. Bedford. Mr. Bedford! Will you give me a slide? Please?”

How could he resist? The Squirt was growing on him already, weaving her childish charms.

“I’m sorry, Emma,” Gary said, as he pulled the picnic basket out of his black Cherokee four-wheel-drive. “I should have given you some warning. I figured if I just turned up on your doorstep, you wouldn’t be able to refuse.”

As much as she tried, Emma couldn’t help grinning at his honesty. Hands planted firmly on her hips, she

said, "Hmmm, well once Sally heard 'picnic' that was it, as you found out."

Not that she was adverse to a picnic herself. The fresh air would do both her and Sally good. They'd been cooped up for too long—over two years in fact. No wonder they looked so pale of late.

Emma insisted on going in separate cars—after all, she didn't really know this Gary Bedford, did she? One date didn't constitute knowing a person. Yes, this was definitely the right way to go.

"What did you say the name of this river was?"

"Mitchell. The Mitchell River." Gary walked over

placing the basket on the ground near the picnic table. He flicked open a tablecloth and spread it over the table. "What's in here, I wonder?"

Emma watched as he pulled out plastic-wrapped packages of sandwiches, cheese and crackers, muffins—homemade by the look of them—fresh fruit, some soft drink and a bottle of white wine.

"Do you have fine china and silverware in there too?" she asked, flabbergasted by the assortment of food.

"Huh?" He looked up, confused by her question.

"Oh, I get it. I've got a housekeeper—she did all this."

Sally kneeled on the seat, also watching Gary unpack the basket. "Yu-um. Raspberry lemonade!"

Gary grinned and poured Sally a drink. "I guess Peggy knows little girls, huh?"

Then he poured the wine, handing a glass to Emma.

"To life, happiness, and love. And," he reached out, first clinking his glass against Sally's, then Emma's, "most of all, to us—the three of us."

Emma looked up into Gary's face. She read the sincerity there, and felt tears trying to fight their way out. How long had it been since someone said something nice to her? How long since she'd spent time with anyone, other than Sally?

She pulled her sunglasses down off the top of her head—she didn't want Gary to see what a wimp she was. She'd spent the last two years being strong, mainly for Sally, but also for herself. The rock of Gibraltar—that was Emma.

She smiled and lifted her glass. "To happiness." A little happiness would be a change. Besides, one wish at a

time was probably all she could handle. "Yeah, to happiness."

"You really are spoiling us."

Nearly every day Gary called around with an invitation of some sort. Today it was a kiddie's amusement park.

"The Squirt doesn't seem to be objecting." He reached out and lightly brushed his fingers along Emma's soft cheek. "Besides, you're worth spoiling."

Emma's eyes misted over. "No one has ever said that before." Her voice was low and shaky.

Gary could feel himself getting angry. "Then they're bloody fools!" How could anyone treat her that way—this wonderful, loveable woman?

Gary edged his way closer, and draped his arm around Emma's shoulders as they stood watching Sally on the merry-go-round.

Emma looked back over her shoulder, and Gary studied her as she scanned their surroundings—an action that seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary for her.

"Everything all right?" It was certainly a strange thing for anyone to do.

"Hmmm? Oh, yeah. Sorry." They walked over to the ride, and Gary lifted Sally from the artificial horse.

"Did you have a good ride, Squirt?" Gary swung the little girl up onto his shoulders and walked toward another ride.

"Yes thank you, Mr. Bedford. Can I have another one now? Please?"

"Sally!"

Gary laughed at Emma's outrage. "'Course you can. How about the ducky ride?" He settled Sally into the ride then issued instructions. "Keep your hands out of the water, Squirt. Okay? Otherwise you might jam your fingers."

Hell! He realized he was starting to sound like the kid's father.

Sally nodded and settled back to enjoy her ride.

He said, "Now that we're alone again..."

Emma looked up sharply at his words. He finished his question, "Tell me what you were looking for."

"Nothing. You don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm a co... I'm, er, very observant. You were definitely looking for something. Or someone."

Emma hesitated slightly before answering, and Gary knew instinctively he was right. "It's nothing. Really. It felt as though someone's gaze was trained on me."

Her eyes remained glued to her shoes. Not once did she look into Gary's eyes, he noted.

He reached out and gently lifted her chin, forcing Emma to look at him. "Really?" What the hell was she running from? Or who?

"Really. Why would I lie to you? Honestly Gary, you're such a worry-wart."

"Maybe I need to be?" He wanted to question her further, but the ride finished, and the opportunity was lost.

With Sally back up on his shoulders, they headed toward the Jumping Castle. "This is not over, Emma. Not by a long shot," he told her, and watched the color drain from her face at his words.

"You see, what did I tell you? This place is perfect for kids. And adults." Finally, he'd talked Emma into going on a real date, for a real dinner, at a real restaurant.

Oh yeah, she'd been reluctant, but with an indoor playground for the Squirt, how could she refuse? He'd even booked a table right outside the children's playroom.

"Okay, I concede." She looked up from her meal and smiled. "You were right."

"Of course I was! I've lived here for most of my life. I know this town inside out and back-to-front."

He reached over and draped his hand over Emma's. "We'll have to do this more often. There is one thing though..."

Emma leaned toward him. "What's that?"

She wasn't going to like it, but too bad. "On a real date, the couple usually travel in the same car." He sat watching, waiting for her reaction.

Emma stared at him. She suddenly sat upright and took a sip of her lemon squash. "I, I can't."

"Can't, or won't?"

Emma wrenched her hand away. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I do." Much to Gary's frustration, Sally interrupted them.

"Mr. Bedford, Mummy. Come and see the room with all the balls. I can roll around and jump, and everything!" She pulled at the leg of Gary's trousers as he stood. "You wanna play too?"

"I'm a bit big, Squirt. They won't let me play. Too bad, huh? Looks like fun."

Gary reached over and touched the end of Emma's nose. "This is not over, Em. We will discuss this, I promise you."

Once again, Emma paled.

"So what made you move this far out of Bairnsdale? It's pretty isolated."

Gary had invited himself in for coffee after their date, and could see Emma was annoyed. She never let him past the front door, but tonight he made it impossible for her to say no. He was inside before she had a chance to refuse him.

She was always wary, careful, and watchful. She didn't talk about herself, her family, or her circumstances. They'd been dating—if you could call it dating—for several weeks, but still Gary knew virtually nothing about Emma. He sensed more than ever, she was involved in something way out of her league.

"The peace and quiet, I guess. Sally and I need some tranquility in our lives. Besides, we're only a few minute's drive out of town."

A pajama clad Sally attempted to climb up onto Gary's knee. "I'm sure Mr. Bedford doesn't want you up there! Behave yourself Sally, please."

Gary reached down and scooped the disappointed child up into his lap. "It's all right. She's no problem, being such a little Squirt and all."

Sally's bottom lip dropped into a pout. "I am not a Squirt!" she growled. "What is a Squirt anyway?"

She looked up into Gary's face, eagerly awaiting a reply.

"Hmmm, let's see. A Squirt is a small, beautiful person. I think that describes you very well, don't you?" He winked across at Emma, watching with renewed

interest as the light from the nearby lamp made her eyes sparkle and shine.

"Right, young lady, it's time for bed. Say good night to Mr. Bedford."

"But, Mummy..."

"No argument, it's way past your bedtime already."

Sally turned her angelic face to Gary. "Mr. Bedford, will you read me a story? Please? I always have a story before I go to sleep."

He felt a twinge of guilt to think that only minutes ago he couldn't wait for her to go to bed. "Only if it's okay with your Mum."

The second Emma nodded her agreement, Sally disappeared, quickly returning with 'Alice in Wonderland'. Gary reached down, scooping the child up into his lap once more, and waited while she settled herself before opening the book.

"Once upon a time..." he began.

"Why do books always start 'Once upon a time'?" Sally enquired.

"Because they do," he responded.

"But why do they?" she demanded.

Gary looked up to see Emma had covered her mouth with her hand, trying to hide her amusement.

"Because, er, kids love it, that's why." This story is going to take forever!

Sally fell asleep half way through the book, and Gary carried her to her room, gently placing the sleeping child in her bed. Emma pulled the blankets up around Sally's shoulders, and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek before turning off the light and leaving the room.

"You're good with kids." She motioned for him to sit down again.

He shrugged. "I have nieces and nephews."

Emma filled the electric jug with water, turned it on and began to prepare the cups. She jumped, startled, as he came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her.

Noting her reaction, Gary realized it was not the first time he had startled her with very little effort.

"I've made a decision," she told him.

Gary was at full attention. "And what's that?" "That you are very pushy."

"I know what I want and go after it. And, I usually get what I want. Anyway," he grinned at her, "you want it too."

Emma's jaw dropped open. "How can you say that?" she demanded. "I haven't done anything to encourage you."

"Liar! You wanted me to kiss you earlier. You know, at the park," his lips formed into a smile, "...before we were rudely interrupted."

Emma's cheeks flooded with color. He knew what she'd been thinking when they were standing alone, waiting for Sally's ride to finish. He'd leaned into her, his mouth open in preparation. Just as he parted her lips slightly, some damned kid with his damned ball interrupted them.

Gary spun her around in his arms. Their bodies were so close, it felt right. Her hips gently touched his, her breasts softly pushed against his chest. She lifted her hands and put them against him, then gently pushed while arching her back away from him.

She was one hell of a woman, but boy, was she ever confused. When he looked into her eyes, she seemed to be pleading with him. Pleading for what? For

him to kiss her? To hold her closer? For him to leave her alone?

He shook his head. Nah—she wanted him.

Gary leaned into her, claiming her mouth. His hands came up around her back, pulling her closer still.

Emma's hands slid up from his chest and looped around his neck, sliding her fingers through his long hair, which tonight hung loose on his shoulders.

Gary began to massage Emma's back with one hand, the other swimming in her silky brown locks. Emma's eyes closed, her body leaned into his, finally relaxing. He pulled her closer still.

The kettle began to emit a high-pitched whistle, and Emma suddenly pulled back, breathless. He looked down into her face. He was as breathless as she was, but his lips curled in amusement. "Still trying to deny what we both know?"

Emma touched her fingers to her lips. "I, er, have to make the coffee," she said. "The jug's boiled."

He still held her in his arms, reluctant to let go as the whistling kettle continued to scream at them.

Gary felt like a teenager, totally infatuated. Only this was more than infatuation, there was electricity between them. "More than electricity—more like lightning," he mused.

He knew it, but Emma still hadn't realized. Or maybe she had? He would have to give her time to work it out.

Gary reached over, flicked off the power switch, and the whistle slowly died. He dove forward to claim his prize once more, but Emma quickly wriggled out of his arms before he could stop her.

A slow smile crept to his lips. He liked a challenge.

After preparing the coffee together, they sat down with their drinks. Emma sat across from him, in what appeared to be a carefully choreographed move.

"So tell me more about yourself, Emma. You're obviously new to the area."

Although they'd dated many times over the last weeks, Emma constantly withheld information about herself. This could be the opportunity Gary needed to get to know her better.

She looked down into her cup, then took a sip. "There's not much to tell really. We moved here nearly a

month ago now. And there's still heaps of stuff to unpack."

Gary looked around the room, puzzled. Everything looked tidy and apparently in its place.

"The boxes are in the spare room, in case you're wondering."

He nodded his understanding. "Why did you move to Bairnsdale?" Good one, Bedford! Straight to the point. What happened to taking it easy?

Emma's eyes bore into him as a look of pain creased her face. Again, he concluded something was not right with this family.

"If you don't want to talk..." Sometimes it was better to tread softly.

She took another sip of coffee. "No, it's all right.

You'll find out sooner or later anyway, I guess."

He watched her carefully as she put down her cup and twisted her hands nervously in her lap.

She looked across at him and licked her lips, an action he'd come to recognize as nervousness.

"Emma?" He watched as her face twisted, as though trying to make a difficult decision.

"I was married," she finally answered.

"But you're divorced now, right?"

She stared at him momentarily, apparently startled by his question. "No. No, I'm not," she answered, licking her lips again.

The atmosphere between them grew suddenly cold and silent. Gary put his cup down on the side table.

"I see," he said, standing to leave, his heart pounding in his chest. As much as he wanted her, no way was he going to push in on someone else's territory. Why the hell didn't she tell me before?

"No, you don't," she said quietly. "Please, sit down and I'll explain." He stood rigid, tension twisting in his gut. "Please?" she whispered.

Reluctantly he sat and waited. He watched powerlessly as she fought back tears, then moved to sit beside her.

"No, don't. Please. I'll be all right." Emma reached up brushing a stray tear from her cheek. "He, my

husband, left for work one morning, and he, uh, met some mates for a drink after work. They, um, were, uh, mugged on their way home." She paused, licking her lips. "Two of them were stabbed in the scuffle. He, uh, died."

He sat staring, listening, watching as her pretty face paled and strained.

"Emma, I'm so sorry." He hadn't realized how hard it had been for her.

Emma continued as though he hadn't spoken. "Anyway, that was two years ago." As he listened, he could hear her fighting to keep the emotion out of her voice, a fight she didn't win. "I've spent the last two years trying to start a new life, but living in the home we made together was—difficult. So here we are, starting all over again." She sat back, exhaling with a sigh of relief.

"So what now? What's the future hold for you here?"

"I'm a remedial massage therapist. In the next few days, I'll start looking for somewhere to set up shop."

"I might be able to help you there," he interrupted. "My brother-in-law is a Real Estate Agent. Sorry... Continue your story."

"That's great—about your brother-in-law I mean." She took another sip of her coffee. "Anyway, enough about me. Don't you think it's your turn now?"

"Okay, that's fair I guess." He took a deep breath. "I'm thirty-two years old... how old are you, by the way?" he asked, squinting across at her.

"Twenty-eight."

"Twenty-eight? I would have guessed twenty-two or three. Wow!"

Emma squirmed in her seat, apparently at his compliment.

"Okay, where was I? Oh yes, I'm single. No kids, no girlfriends, just in case you're wondering." He noted her obvious amusement at this last tidbit. "I own and run a holiday farm at Bruthen. That's not far out of Bairnsdale. It's a working farm where families can spend their holidays. Great for city folk who don't know the difference between a cow and a bull! I'd love to show you and the, er, Sally, around sometime."

"Sounds great!" When she smiled he watched some of the previous strain leave her face.

"Good. How's tomorrow sound? I could come over

and pick the two of you up and..."

"I was right. You are pushy."

Gary felt unreasonably deflated. He was sure Emma was starting to relax in his company.

"I didn't say no. I said you're pushy. Tomorrow's Sunday, so I guess that's fine."

He rubbed his hands together. "Great. That's great. I'll pick you up at ten. All right?"

"Fine, no problem." She looked at her watch.

Gary realized it was getting late.

"Okay, I take the hint. If you're sure you're all right I'll go." She nodded and he stood to leave. "Emma, thanks—for a wonderful day."

When they reached the front door, he hesitated briefly, then spun around to face his hostess. He looked into her face, studying her amazing blue eyes.

"Time to go, I think." Emma broke eye contact.

"Not quite."

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her against him, reluctant to leave without tasting her.

He covered her mouth before she could protest.

Their lips met in a gentle alliance, unlike the first kiss, so full of urgency. As much as she wanted him, Emma unwillingly decided her life was just too complicated, she couldn't indulge herself. Nor could she involve Gary, and possibly risk their lives, and Sal's. She reluctantly pulled out of his grip, tears threatening at the corners of her eyes, as reality hit.

"Gary?"

"Hmmm?" He pulled her closer.

"Are you listening to me?" Her voice reduced to almost a whisper now, and much to her disgust, she knew he'd notice the shakiness in it. Her fears were confirmed when he pulled back and looked into her face.

"Emma? What's wrong?" He brought his hands up her back, massaging her gently. Still she didn't answer.

"Emma? Is it something I've done? Please, tell me."

He continued to study her face, which ached with the strain of trying to maintain her composure.

"I, I can't. I've decided we can't, I can't see you again." There, I've said it. Finished it. Over with. And he'll just have to accept it.

"The hell you say!" Gary frowned down at her.

"What's gotten into you? Everything was fine a minute ago." He brushed a stray tear from her cheek.

"Stop that!" She swiped at his hand. "You're making this very difficult for me, Gary. You're not supposed to be nice, or gentle, or any of the things you seem to be."

He laughed, "I'm not? You want me to be, let's see...mean, rough, and callous?"

She knew he wanted her to see how foolish she sounded.

He continued to look down at her, watching her. What was he doing now? Look into her soul, her mind, maybe her heart? Fat chance!

She pulled her gaze away. She knew what he was up to, and it almost worked. Almost.

She turned back to him, tears brimming in her eyes, but she had to be strong. This was the wrong time for a relationship. The wrong place. The wrong universe.

She would be strong.

Emma mustered all her strength, then spoke curtly. "Please, go home." She swallowed hard. This would have to be the hardest thing she'd done in a long time.

She started to walk away from him, leaving Gary standing at the open door, but he caught her around the waist. "I won't walk out of your life. I've waited too long to find you." His voice was a gentle whisper. Was he trying to sooth her with his words? "Tell me what the problem is."

Emma squirmed in his arms, trying to free herself from his grip.

"I—can't. And I simply will not see you again. Ever." There, she couldn't get any clearer than that, could she?

Gary leaned forward, kissing her neck tentatively. A tiny shiver went through her.

He gently ran his fingers along her bare arm, from her shoulder to her wrist, then slowly rubbed the tips of his fingers over the back of her hand.

She shivered again.

He lifted her hand to his mouth, kissing each fingertip, one by one.

“When you touch me, my whole body sings,” she told him quietly, as he gently pressed his warm lips against her shoulder.

“Then why are you telling me to go? We’re over? Hell, we haven’t even started yet!”

Emma could hear his frustration, but more, she sensed his confusion. What was she going to do? She couldn’t tell him the truth—no way. She wouldn’t pull him into her ring of danger. What if they found out, then killed him? Tears began to well behind her eyes again.

Damn it, don’t cry! she silently demanded of herself.

She sighed, the kind of sigh that makes you feel better for all of five seconds, then leaves you right back where you started. “I can’t tell you much, but I will tell you this—if you continue to see me, it could change your life forever.”

He reached out and stroked her cheek with his fingers. “I want you, Emma.” His statement was almost a sigh.

What had she done? Had their relationship already gone too far? Well, it was too damned bad.

She had to save his life. There was no other way.

"Damn you! You don't know me, or anything about me," she snapped, pounding her fists against his chest.

"You could get yourself killed just seeing me!"

Damn! She hadn't meant to blurt that out.

"What the...?"

She looked up at him as he stared back at her, looking into her eyes. What did he see? Did her sadness show? What about her fondness for him, perhaps that seeped just a little?

He frowned at her. "You're joking, right?"

She prayed her expression didn't give anything away. Gary watched her closely. She licked her lips as he spoke quietly. "What's going on, Emma?"

She screamed inwardly—would he never give up? "I already told you, I can't say."

Gary took a deep breath, tightening his grip on her. "Okay, let's start from the beginning."

"Don't you understand anything? If I tell you, you're as good as dead." Emma brushed at the trickle of tears slowly rolling down her cheeks, at the same time trying to wrench herself out of Gary's hold.

He took another deep breath, and pushed her head against his chest. "It's okay to cry," he told her.

It's okay to cry? Damn you, Gary Bedford!

He regarded her closely as she forced back her composure, brushing impatiently at her tears. "I'm fine. Just go home."

Gary reached down, lifting her into his arms.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snapped at him, trying to wriggle out of his grip.

"We're going to sit down and talk this through."

He strode across the room and dropped her on the sofa.

Emma sat defiantly with her arms across her chest. Who the hell does he think he is? This was her house, and no one could come in here and tell her what to do. There was no way she was going to spill her guts. And if he thought she was, he had another damned thing coming. Humph!

They sat in silence for almost five minutes, until suddenly Gary began his interrogation. "Where were you living before? Did something happen there to upset you like this?"

She stared straight ahead. He had no right asking these questions and demanding she answer them.

Gary gripped her chin and turned Emma to face him.

"Melbourne. We were living in Melbourne," she almost whispered. So much for being defiant.

"And?"

"Okay! Something happened. Only I don't know what." Now she was getting real testy. Damn the man!

Their eyes locked.

"You don't know what. Come on, of course you do." His lips lifted in a sardonic smile.

Seemed like the only way to get him to go away, was to tell him the truth. Emma licked her lips, took a deep breath, and sat tall on the sofa as her resistance swayed.

"Okay. Okay. I'll tell you what I know, which isn't much." Emma felt tears trickling down her face, and wiped them away.

"Ed—that was my husband's name," She swiped her errant tears again. "...was a financial controller for a large corporation. According to the police, he got involved with some very unsavory characters and was embezzling money for them.

"The police said he got greedy, kept more than he should have for himself, and they, The Mob, the underworld or whoever it was, found out and murdered him."

Finally, her ordeal was over, and Emma straightened her back, waiting for Gary's reaction.

He sat in stunned disbelief. What the hell was he thinking, Emma wondered.

Finally he spoke. "Why didn't you just tell me all this?"

She stared into her lap at her twisting hands. "Because I was afraid."

"Afraid? Of me?"

She looked up at him. "Of what you'd think of me."

"Oh, Emma!"

She jumped, startled, as he began to massage her shoulders from behind the sofa.

"Mmm, that's good." She leaned back, relaxing slightly.

"So tell me, where's the danger? I mean, if he's dead, surely the problem ends there?"

He couldn't let it go, could he? As if she hadn't already told him too much. "I wish it were that easy. It seems 'they'—whoever 'they' are—think I know where their money is, which I don't."

He stopped massaging. "What now?" Emma wondered.

"What makes you think that? Has someone been harassing you? Tell me who, and I'll fix the sons-of-b..."

She was trying to relax, really she was. This was the best massage she'd ever had. It was the only one, come to think of it.

"No one has harassed me, but I've had lots of break-ins. You know the sort of thing. Ransacking I think they call it. Nothing taken, just a heap of mess. We arrived home a few times to find someone in the house, and the police suggested we move away and hope it stops."

She heard Gary's intake of breath, but

continued. "Well, here we are, many moves later, and hopefully that's the end of it." She looked up, trying to fathom Gary's reaction. "I don't want you involved. It's bad enough Sal's involved in this mess."

Emma felt her strong side move in again. She was washed out, totally drained of all the strength she'd upheld for the last two years, but she vowed to continue on the track of self-preservation. "God, if anything happens to her..." As her voice broke, Gary came around and sat beside her on the sofa, draping his arm around her shoulders, but she pushed him away. "No! I won't let anything happen to her. I'm her mother, and I'll look out for her." Her heart was breaking, but her resolve was rock solid.

"That's right, because you're both coming home with me." Gary sat resolutely on Emma's sofa, obviously pleased with the decision he'd made.

"No!" She stared into those mesmerizing brown eyes, full of conviction about how he was going to run her life. "No way. Apart from the fact we've known each

other for next to no time, you have no idea what you're getting into."

"The hell I don't, you just told me, and it's very clear to me that you shouldn't be staying here without protection. You go pack a bag, I'll get the Squirt."

"Hey you, stop bossing me around. We're not going anywhere. This is our home, and this is where we're staying."

"Damn it, Emma, after what you've told me, you still want to stay here, alone?"

His eyes were flaring and his lips firmly set, determined to sway her.

Emma sighed, reached out, and touched his cheek, running her fingers along the slight stubble on his chin. Gary reached up and caught her fingers with his own.

"What do you think I've been doing for the past two years?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "I've survived so far. Besides, they've never hurt me, or even attempted to. They're there, in the background, watching, searching. Waiting I guess, in case something turns up."

"That does it." A muscle in his neck twitched. "If you won't come with me, I'm staying here. No argument, no discussion."

He settled back into the sofa, arms across his chest, legs spread out in front of him.

"That's what you think! Go home. You're not staying and that's final."

Emma jumped up off the sofa and headed for the front door. Before he could stop her, Emma opened the door and was waiting impatiently for Gary to leave.

"Okay, I'm not stupid. I know when I'm beat. See you bright and early tomorrow." He leaned forward and planted a soft kiss on her forehead.

"No, we decided..."

"No, you decided, but I didn't agree. 'Til tomorrow."

Gary was behind the wheel before Emma could protest again. She watched as his black Cherokee four-wheel-drive disappeared into the night.

Finally out of Emma's sight, Gary pulled to the side of the road, trying to come to terms with the fact that Emma was Edward Larkin's widow. Larkin, alleged crime boss—but how many murders had he actually carried out himself? Did Emma know who her husband really was? Surely not—she didn't seem that kind of woman.

Gary stepped out of the Cherokee still shaking his head. He paced the gravel road, lit a cigarette, and then

promptly ground it out. As he sat back on the driver's seat, he punched in the familiar number on his mobile phone.

"Lawson," Gary's superior snapped.

"Detective Inspector Gary Bedford speaking, Sir." Gary was tense, anticipating the reception he would get at this hour of the night.

"You do know what time it is, don't you, Inspector?"

"Yes, Sir, I do. And I apologize if I woke you..."

Gary pulled a cigarette out of its packet, then decided against lighting it. He was in enough hot water already for calling so late, without sounding distracted.

"All right, all right, this better be good. What's your problem, Bedford?"

Gary cleared his throat. "Do you remember a case in Melbourne about two years ago, believed to be linked to the underworld..."

"Which one, Bedford?" Lawson interrupted. "There are so many."

For Christ's sake, listen, Gary thought impatiently, then you'd find out. "The Larkin case, Sir. Edward Joseph Larkin."

He kept his voice distant, matter of fact.

"Larkin? Yes, yes, I remember." Gary heard a spark of interest filter down the line.

"I have a strong lead on it, Sir, and would like to put together a team and get cracking immediately."

"Immediately? Do you mean tonight, Bedford?"

"Yes, Sir, tonight." Gary paused briefly then added, "And Sir, I'm going to need some outside help on this." He heard a resigned sigh on the other end of the line.

"All right, Bedford—whatever it takes. Can I go back to bed now?"

"Yes, Sir. Sorry." Gary stepped back out of the black Cherokee. Pacing the dry, dusty road once more, he watched the trees as they moved slightly in the gentle breeze, silhouetted against the blackness that surrounded him. He listened to the hooting of the owls, their familiar call helped calm him, albeit just a little. Gary looked up at the sky, at the stars sprinkled throughout, and the half moon providing what limited light there was.

He sketched out a plan in his head as he continued to pace the familiar back road, and took a deep draw on yet another cigarette. He needed to cut back.

Making his decision at last, he ground out the barely smoked butt on the road. Gary pulled out his mobile phone again and waited impatiently for an answer. "Come on, pick up the damned phone."

"Speak to me." The voice was sleepy, barely audible.

"Did I wake you?"

"Tell me this is pleasure and not business." Detective Senior Sergeant Peter Carson was much more alert this time.

"Sorry, mate, official business."

Pete groaned down the line.

"I can't tell you much over the phone, Pete, but it involves Emma."

"Emma—the Emma? The secret girlfriend, Emma?"

Gary could hear the concern in Pete's voice. Pete Carson was the only person he'd told about the new woman in his life.

"Yeah, the Emma. My Emma." Gary heard the click of Pete's cigarette lighter, then the inevitable exhalation of that first puff. "There'll be a meeting of the team at

seven-thirty tomorrow morning at my place. Tonight though, I need you for surveillance at Emma's place."

"Sounds serious."

Gary arranged to meet Pete not far from Emma's house to fill him in on the details, then added, "I know it's a given, but make sure you take your weapon. And Pete, watch your back."

End of Chapter One



A word about the author...

Cheryl Wright is an award-winning Australian author, freelance journalist, and editor.

She is widely published, including novels, short stories, non-fiction books, poetry, and features. Her work has also been published in several anthologies and other collections. Cheryl presents workshops at schools, libraries, and writer's conferences, and also teaches writing online when time permits.

Visit Cheryl's author website for more information:

<http://www.cheryl-wright.com>

Reviews

If you like your romance on the dark side with a little danger mixed in with your happy ever after or if you need your hero and heroine to be truly deserving of each other, look no farther. Just look for something to help ease those goose bumps you'll get from the roller coaster ride that is Saving Emma.

--- LASR

Love, action, and suspense are all in one great book by Cheryl Wright that will keep you entertained all the way to the end. I loved that Emma Larkin is no damsel in distress, but a fighter all the way.

--- HEA Reviews

Secrets, treachery and Gary's exuberant family are woven together into this brilliantly written suspense-filled romance.

--- Margaret Tanner, Published Author

This is the way romantic suspense should be done!'

--- Johnna, Novel Spot

Saving Emma is a well-written, humorous, story about trust and starting over again.

--- Michelle, Fallen Angel Reviews

Fans of warm characters and feisty women and suspense, will love this heart-warming story.

--- Pam Slade, Love Romances

Cheryl Wright gives us a heart pounding, soul-searching story that is a definite keeper and will have you looking for more from this author in the future.

--- Briana Burrell, Romance Junkies

Saving Emma is a story about the fight to save Emma and Sally before they are killed. It is a story of love and the family of law-enforcing Bedfords who use their farm to watch over both mother and daughter while the attacker is tracked down.

Once you pick up Saving Emma it is hard to put down!

--- Pamela Faye, Rolling Seas Promotions

Saving Emma is [now available](#) in both electronic and print versions from [The Wild Rose Press](#).

It is also available from [Fictionwise](#) and other selected online stores.

