



# **SAVING EMMA**

by

**Cheryl Wright**

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### **Credits**

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## WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

### *Saving Emma*

The love between Emma and Gary is as astounding as the writing of the author, Cheryl Wright. SAVING EMMA is a love story like no other—saving a mother and daughter from the terror they face so that they are free to love and to be loved in return. Emma is such a strong, caring, and loving woman just as Gary is a noble, trusting, and o-la-la male. Add in a precious little girl, a whole brood of a family and you get a delicious read. All in all, SAVING EMMA was a top notch read!

Reviewed by Gabrielle Channing for Romantic Interludes

Fans of warm characters and feisty women and suspense, will love this heart-warming story. With a mix of humor, tender love and an interesting plot this reviewer hopes you'll enjoy Emma and Sally's journey to happiness as much as she did.

Reviewed by Pam Slade for Love Romances

## Dedication

To Alan, my husband of thirty 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, my wonderful mother for all her support, enthusiasm and proof reading. Sadly, my darling dad is no longer with us, except in our hearts.

## Chapter 1

*WHAT DID WE do to deserve this?* Emma Larkin thought, as she sat on Sally's bed assessing the damage. The padded bed head had been slashed, clothes were hanging out of drawers, even the toy box had been up-ended.

"I thought we'd get away from all this," she said to herself more 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 they'd left what little family they had back in Melbourne.

She had absolutely no one to turn to.

The move to Bairnsdale was a last ditch effort to get their lives back on track. All this upheaval, and what had it achieved? Precious 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, then settled herself comfortably on Emma's lap.

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

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

\* \* \* \*

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 yourself in dangerous or life threatening situations; chicks just don't go for it.

Naturally there had 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.

A family 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 was pretty tough.

\* \* \* \*

Smoke drifted from his cigarette as Gary watched a small girl running along the lush grass; a twenty-something babe close on the young girl's heels. The bountiful flowerbeds scattered amongst the trees providing a colourful backdrop, he looked the young woman over more thoroughly as she came toward him.

Her long brown hair made her skin appear pale, her above average height accentuated by her long legs. As the wind came up, her white over-shirt flapped open in the wind, revealing her scarlet tank top and black bike shorts.

Families were picnicking, children playing and dogs barking, adults were talking or just relaxing; Gary had seen it all before, but today was oblivious as he watched her hair blow into dishevelment in the warm breeze.

He stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette on the step, stood up then walked down the few steps from the Rotunda, stepping out onto the grass.

“Oh boy,” Gary scolded himself as he collided heavily with her.

She was breathless—the wind had been knocked out of her by the impact. She grabbed at his shirtfront trying to get her balance.

*How could he have been so damned thoughtless?*

The object of his attention scowling at Gary, he reached out and tried to steady her but she flicked his hands away. He watched helplessly as she bent forward, her hands on her knees and still gasping for air.

He silently observed as her eyes began to scan his body. From experience, Gary knew the first thing she’d notice would be his massive height. Six foot five—far from ordinary. He reached up and ran his hand over his chin. Goddamn it! 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, his deep brown eyes. Hers were wide with rage. Her eyes slid to his open denim shirt, then lingered on his hair-covered chest. After settling on his flat belly, they drifted to his crotch. Goddamn her—she was checking out his... Nah, she wouldn’t do that—would she?

Her appraisal continued on his jeans—his threadbare jeans. Gary groaned inwardly. Why did he have to dress like a slob on his days off? At least he was wearing 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 small child. “Sorry, I didn’t mean...” He leaned down toward the winded woman.

The little girl began to kick at his ankles, and Gary reached down, picking her up with one hand. “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 added 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, and Gary realized she had only now become aware of the situation.

“You’re her mother?” He let out an audible sigh of disappointment then 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. He was puzzled by her actions, and contemplated the woman as a shiver went through her body.

Reaching forward he picked up her delicate hand, and noticed her blue eyes widen once more. 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 imagination?*

“Gary Bedford,” he said as his eyes leisurely roamed her body. *Right back at ya, lady*, he thought. She pulled her shirt around herself, and 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. It was very puzzling.

“I, er, wanted to meet you. But I didn’t mean to run into you. *That 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; was it anger, annoyance or fear? What ever it was, he was determined 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; it was obvious to Gary she was not going to answer.

“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? Gary thought. James? Larkin?*

*Larkin...* He tried to remember where he’d heard the name before, but his thoughts were interrupted by the little girl’s protest.

“But, Mummy, I don’t like our pretend name.”

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

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

Emma took a step back.

Belatedly, Gary realized he had 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 Colosseum?” *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 was frustrated with the way the conversation was going nowhere. Right or wrong, he wanted to know Emma Larkin. *Or was it James?* The lady positively thrilled him, intrigued him, and touched 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 was looking about her nervously, and Gary was sure she was about to retreat.

Sally began tugging on her mother’s shirttail to get Emma’s 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.”

Gary 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. Gary 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 was pretty good at reading people's faces and their reactions; he had to be, it went with the territory. This lady was scared, real scared. But why?

Gary 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 fighting 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...

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 just 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?"

He was smirking again, he was sure of it. Surely she couldn't refuse an invitation like that?

\* \* \* \*

"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. Emma stood as the child skipped away. Gary caught her lightly around the waist, only to have Emma flick his hands 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, slip through his fingers.

He quietly moved forward and lightly wrapped his arms around her. They fitted 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 and Gary was sure Emma was going to shove him away; instead she gripped his strong arms and sank back into his lean body.

As though her life depended on him.

Gary reveled in her nearness, but sensed her battle with her conscious, her decision to get close to him. She'd no sooner relax than she'd pull away again. It seemed she wanted to be comfortable with him, but maybe it was a risk she could ill afford?

What was even more strange—she'd insisted they meet there. What was she afraid of? Him? There was more to it than that; he'd sensed it 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. It was familiar. Lavender? His mother had a lavender bush. Gary literally had to walk past it to get through her front door.

It 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, chum,” she said lightly. “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.

\* \* \* \*

“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 him. 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 the two of them were looking so pale of late.

Emma had insisted on going in separate cars—after all, she didn’t really know this Gary Bedford, did she? One date does not count for 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 and placed 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.

“Have you got fine china and silverware in there too?” she asked, flabbergasted by the assortment of food.

“Huh?” He looked up startled. “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 began to pour Sally a drink. “I guess Peggy knows little girls, huh?”

He poured the wine and handed a glass to Emma. “To life, happiness and love. And,” He reached out and clinked his glass against Sally’s glass, 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 her tears trying to fight their way out. How long had it been since someone had 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 had 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 this way—this wonderful, loving, 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 Emma to be doing.

“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 began walking 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! I’m starting to sound like the kid’s father!*

Sally nodded and settled back to enjoy her ride.

“Now that we’re alone again,” Emma looked up sharply, “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 just felt as though someone’s gaze was trained on me.” Emma’s eyes were glued to her shoes. Not once did she look into Gary’s eyes, he noted.

He reached out and lifted her chin, forcing Emma to look at him. “Really?” *What the hell is 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?” Gary 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 was 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 the place 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 abruptly 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."

Again, Emma went pale.

\* \* \* \*

"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 had never let him past the front door, but tonight he'd made it impossible for her to say no; he was inside before she had a chance to refuse him.

Emma 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 over two weeks now, but still Gary knew virtually nothing about Emma. He sensed more than ever, that she was involved in something way out of her league.

"The peace and quiet, I guess. Sally and I need some tranquillity in our lives. Besides, we're only a few minutes 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, but quickly returned with 'Alice in Wonderland'. Gary reached down and scooped 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,” was his vague response.

“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 a very pushy person.”

“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.” A smile creased his lips. “Before we were rudely interrupted.”

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

Gary spun her around in his arms. Their bodies were close, it felt so 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. Gary looked into her eyes, she seemed to be pleading with him. Pleading for what? For him to kiss her? For him hold her closer? For him to leave her alone?

He shook his head. Nah—she wanted him.

Gary leaned into her and claimed 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, her fingers sliding 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 were closed, she was finally relaxing. He pulled her closer still.

The jug 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 jug 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 just have to give her time to work it out.

Gary reached over and flicked off the power switch, and the whistle slowly died. He dived forward to claim his prize once more, but Emma was too quick and wriggled out of his arms before he could stop her. A slow smile came to his lips. He liked a challenge.

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

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

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

Emma 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 was 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 that something simply was not right with this family.

"If you don't want to talk about it..." 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.

Emma 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 was 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." Gary stood rigid. "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 and brushed 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 stopped momentarily and licked 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 that she was 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 has been—difficult. So here we are, starting all over again." She sat back and breathed 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, that's 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!" She smiled, and he watched as some of the previous strain left 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 just 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." Emma looked at her watch. 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 lingeringly into her face, studying her amazing blue eyes.

"Time to go, I think," Emma told him.

"Not quite."

He grabbed Emma and pulled her against him, reluctant to leave. His mouth covered hers before she could protest.

Their lips met in a gentle alliance, unlike the first kiss, which was 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 both 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 was almost a whisper now, and much to her disgust, Emma knew Gary would have noticed 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 and began to massage her gently, but still she didn't answer. "Emma? Is it something I've done? Please, tell me."

He continued to study her face, which was now aching with the strain.

“I, I can’t. But 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 was frowning 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 anything of the things you seem to be.”

He continued to look down at her, staring into her eyes. What was he trying to do? Look into her soul, her mind, or maybe her heart? *Fat chance!*

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

She turned back to him, tears brimming in her eyes, but Emma knew she had to be strong. It 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 had to do for 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 can’t walk out of your life. I’ve waited so long to find you.” His voice was a gentle whisper. “Tell me what the problem is.”

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

“I—can’t. And I simply cannot see you again. Ever.” *There, you couldn’t get it any clearer than that, could you?*

Gary leaned forward and kissed her neck. 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, and kissed her fingertips, 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 it’s over? Hell, it hasn’t even started yet!”

Emma could see his anger, but more than that, she sensed his confusion. Perhaps he really did love her? What was she going to do? She couldn’t tell him—no way. She couldn’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 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, 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 voice 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. Emma pounded 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; he was staring, looking into her eyes. *What did he see? Did her sadness show? What about her love 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 ever give up?* "I already told you, I can't say."

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

"Don't you understand anything? If I tell you, you're dead." Emma brushed at the trickle of tears that slowly rolled 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 herself into composure, brushing impatiently at her tears. "I'm fine. Just go home."

Gary reached down and lifted her into his arms.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snapped at him.

"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 did he think he was!* This was her house, and no one was going to come 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 to interrogate her. "Where were you living before? Did something happen there to upset you like this?"

She stared straight ahead—he had no right making these demands.

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 and took a deep breath. "Okay. Okay. I'll tell you what I know, which isn't much." Emma felt tears trickling down her face, and swiped at them. "Ed—that was my husband's name," She swiped at her errant tears again. "Was a Financial Controller for a large corporation. It seems he got involved with some very unsavory characters and was embezzling money for them.

"According to the police, 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 tears flooded Emma's face.

She waited for his reaction, but Gary sat in stunned disbelief. *What the hell was he thinking?*

Finally he spoke. "Why didn't you just tell me to start with?"

She stared into her 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.

"Mmmm, 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’—who ever ‘they’ are—think I know where their money is, which I don’t.”

He stopped massaging. *What now?*

“What makes you think that? Has someone been harassing you? Tell me who, and I’ll fix the son-of-a-...”

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’ve arrived home to find someone in the house a few times now, and the police suggested we move away and hope it stops.”

She heard Gary’s intake of breath, but continued. “Well, here we are, and it’s still going on. And I don’t want to involve you. It’s bad enough Sal’s involved.” She felt hot tears trickling down her face again.

Emma felt washed out, totally drained of all the strength she had upheld for the last two years. “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.

“I won’t let anything happen to her, or you. You’re coming home with me.”

“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 little more than two weeks, 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. 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 just told me, you still want to stay here, alone?”

His eyes were flaring, his lips set firm, 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 just 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, obviously proud of what he’d decided.

“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 Gary could stop her, Emma opened the door and was waiting impatiently for him to leave.

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

“No, we decided...”

“No, you decided, and 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. He was still coming 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 wasn't that kind of woman.

Gary stepped out of the Cherokee still shaking his head. He paced the gravel road, lit a cigarette, then promptly ground it out. As he sat back on the driver's seat, he dialed a familiar number on his mobile.

"Lawson," Gary's superior snapped into the phone.

"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 before adding, "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?"

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 the 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.

Making his decision at last, he ground out the barely smoked butt on the road. Gary pulled out his mobile 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; I need your help."

Pete groaned down the line. "Official business?"

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

"Emma—the Emma? Love of your life, 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, and how much he loved her.

“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 gave Pete the necessary information, then added, “I know it’s a given, but make sure you take your weapon, and Pete, watch your back.”

## End of Chapter One

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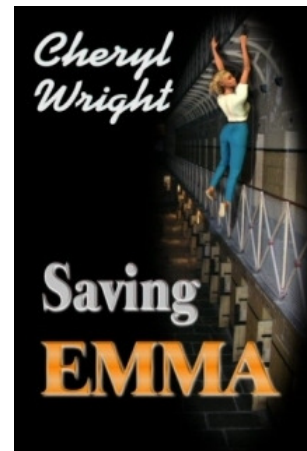
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