

## Chapter One

**A** noise, a sense of unease, awoke Emma Weber. Her eyes snapped open. A

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

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

She scooted away from him, dragging her blanket with her. "W-what do you want?"

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

The tiny hairs on the back of her neck prickled. She held her breath, unsure if she should fight or flee.

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

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

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

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

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

He let go and nodded. “Understandable.” Again, he smiled, and despite her instinct to flee, his easygoing manner softened her tight stance.

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

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

“I mean you no harm...” His calm, reassuring voice trailed off, and she hoped he meant what he said.

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

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

“So, Emma, how long have you been here?”

“Four hellish months.”

“Believe me. This place is nothing compared to hell, or so I’m told. What happened?”

“Life, and not what I expected.” Emma watched flames dancing and crackling inside the makeshift firepit. Her life had changed overnight then spiraled downhill. Husband’s death. House foreclosed. Car repossessed. Jobless without a permanent address and dependable transportation.

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

Emma glanced across the barrel to Charlie. “I got blown away in a storm.”

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

Emma shrugged. She wasn't about to pour her heart out to a man she'd just met. Talking about her mess of a life made its cruel reality cut that much deeper when brought to the surface.

*Don't think. Don't go there...pity parties are for the desperate. Remember that.*

Charlie's eyebrows canted. "Okay, then..." He rubbed his hands over the fire. "Are you hungry for a bite?"

The thought of food made her stomach twitch. She'd missed the evening meal at the mission. The bus was running behind schedule. She refused to pick through garbage cans for scraps others tossed away and mostly lived on coffee, and soup and crackers. Back when she had a home and money, she'd never considered the leftovers she dumped out, never thought about those who went hungry every night. Now she was living the nightmare. What she wouldn't give for a hot meal on this cold night.

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

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

"They cater to the late-night crowd."

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

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

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

Charlie continued to rub his hands over the barrel as if they'd never get warm. "Come on. The walk will do you good, fresh air, and besides, the fire is going out."

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

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

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

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

*Who am I kidding?* If she had to call out for help, people would run in the opposite direction. She was homeless, not worth fighting for. She was on her own. Hell, nothing new. Married life hadn't been any different. Her husband spent his time working, and he rebuffed her suggestion that she get a job. She'd spent many days by herself. Childless, meeting a PTA mom was out of the question. If it wasn't for her sketchpad and her dreams of becoming a world-class fashion designer, she'd have died of boredom. Crazy though...despite it all, she still loved the man who'd been taken from her too soon.

A gust of wind caught her off guard. "Boy, it's windy tonight." A spike of adrenaline shot through her, punching her heart to beat faster. She tightened her ragged blanket around her neck and fought the brutal cold seeping in through her clothes and settling into her joints. "And cold, too." She shivered.

Charlie glanced at her and smiled. "You shouldn't concentrate on the headwinds opposing you but focus on the tailwinds that push you forward in life."

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

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

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

Relief eased Emma's angst.

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

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

Charlie pulled out a chair. Emma sat and parked her suitcase beside her. He took the seat next to hers. "Best meal in town, or so I'm told."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dessert came next, an enormous piece of chocolate cake with gooey frosting. Emma ate it all, every morsel, though her stomach felt bloated with the unaccustomed quantity. If she didn't eat for the next couple of days, she would survive.

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

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

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

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

"Thank you." Grateful, Emma smiled.

“Until tomorrow.” With a hopeful expression on her face, Julia held out her hand. Remembering the dirt beneath her own nails, Emma shoved her hands into her pockets. Charlie shook Julia’s clean hand in a big dirty paw.

“You all be safe,” Julia said.

Emma and Charlie stepped outside. The air held a hint of coming snow. Emma shivered. Halloween had passed into November, Thanksgiving was fast approaching, and winter would set in soon. How would she survive when snow covered the ground, and the weather wasn’t fit for man or beast?

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Doctor Jack Bradbury didn’t believe in miracles or divine intervention. A man of science, he based his life on facts.

Fact one: next month would mark the anniversary of his mother’s heart transplant surgery. Fact two: after being told prayers would help find her a heart, a heart was found. A coincidence. Nothing more. Because he didn’t pray. He searched on every donor network list in the country.

Prayers did not make wishes come true that someone would have to die so his mother would live. Fact three: it was fate, as it was four years ago today, when the love of his life passed away. The pain of losing his wife still hurt like hell.

The ring of his cell phone jerked him out of his thoughts. He glanced at the display, and a little jolt of panic raced through him. “Mother, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Never mind me. How are you?”

*Right.* His mother, pretty much recovered from her heart transplant, was checking up on him, though she rarely called him at work. “I’m hanging in there. I have plenty of patients to keep me busy.” Busy or not, today’s date hung over him like a rain cloud that followed him everywhere, despite his best effort to hurry through the day.

“Can you break for lunch?” Mom was just being a mom, trying to distract him, being there for him should he need uplifting.

Jack glanced at his Apple watch. Noon. He flicked the watch to view his schedule. “Sure. I can meet you at one.”

“Wonderful. How about Marabella’s?”

That was his mother’s favorite Italian restaurant. “I’ll meet you there.”

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

He glanced up at the nurse and nodded. "Mom. I gotta go. Love you." He tapped his phone off then hurried to the elevator. The door opened, and before he stepped in, a man wearing scrubs stepped out, nearly bumping into him.

"Oh, sorry," the man said, breathless. "First day here. I'm a bit lost and late." "Where do you need to be?"

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

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

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

"Welcome." Jack accepted Charlie's solid handshake. His bright blue eyes had a light to them that drew him in. "I'm on my way up to see a patient. Since you're on today, I might as well put you to work."

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

She? Had he said anything about his patient being a woman? "Heart surgery. Mrs. Keller is a nice old lady, but she has a bite to her. So, don't say I didn't warn you."

"So noted." Charlie smiled.

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

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

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

"Better now that my favorite doctor is here."

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

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

"Anything else, Doc?" Charlie asked.

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

Charlie left the room.

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

"I like him," she chirped. Her words of praise threw him off balance. Jack stared at her, baffled.

"In fact, from now on, when you're not on call, I will only see him, and not those other so-called doctors that disturb me." She gave him a dismissive wave.

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

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

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

"I need someone to talk to." She patted the bed. "Sit."

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

"Good for you. Is she a looker?"

"She's my mother."

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

He had no time for this nonsense. Jack stood. "Mrs. Keller, you know you're my favorite gal." He forced a smile, hoping to appease her.

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

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

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

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

"I look forward to seeing you, and maybe you can send back that sweet PA, Charlie." "I'll send him over to check in on you when we finish our rounds."

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

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

"I'm enjoying a delicious glass of Pinot." She reached across the table and touched his hand. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine."

"How are you really?"

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

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

The server walked up and handed them menus. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Nothing for me. Thanks." Jack put down his menu. "But I'll have the chicken marsala." "Make that two." His mother handed her menu to the young man then turned her attention back to Jack.

"It's been four years."

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

"You need to get back out there."

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

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

“No. Not Donna. A patient.”

“Then it’s obvious to everyone that you’re lonely and need a life.”

“I have my work.” Jack loved his mother, but her persistence gave him a headache. He wasn’t some lonely bachelor who needed family members to set him up.

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

“My heart is just fine. I’m not interested in dating, and I don’t want to discuss this right now. Especially today...on the anniversary.”

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

“Here you go.” The server brought two steaming plates of chicken and pasta.

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

“Busy. I have a bridal party coming in on Saturday for hair and makeup. Look, you need to know something, and I’d rather it came from me than your sister. And stop cutting that chicken like you’re dissecting a heart.”

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

“I’m spending my free time serving food in a soup kitchen.”

“You’re what?” The burning in his chest intensified. He reached into his pocket, opened a bottle of antacid, and popped a pill. “Are you kidding?”

“Shhh.” She leaned across the table. “Keep your voice down.”

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

His mother dotted her lips with her napkin. "Yes. After all that happened. I've got a second chance at life. This is my way of giving back. I just thank God—"

"Leave God out of this." He inhaled sharply then lowered his voice. "Where was God when that drug addicted street thug dragged my wife into that alley?" Jack's chair scraped the floor as he pushed away from the table and stood. If he didn't walk away soon, he'd say something he'd regret. "And now you're going down there to help those bums." He was aware of the sudden silence in the room as those around him clung to his words.

His mother shook her head. "Not every homeless person is a drug addict or bad person." "I gotta get some air, but this conversation isn't over."

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

Two men from the encampment walked up, stood beside him, and held their hands over the roaring fire.

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

They acknowledged him with a nod.

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

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

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

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

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

"How'd you wind up here?"

Charlie recognized the deep voice. He lifted his gaze across the barrel to Jeffrey. His balance impaired, Jeffrey leaned a little too close to the fire, trying to warm his chest. He'd been

a stockbroker on Wall Street, lived the good life, traveling, throwing money away as if his wallet were bottomless. Then he got greedy, made some risky buys, and when his margins came due, he lost his home and found solace in a bottle of just about any kind of alcohol he could find. He'd even drank rubbing alcohol and nearly lost his life.

Tugging his oversized blue jacket tighter across his chest, Charlie held the collar closer to his neck. "I worked in a bank right out of high school. Was thirty-five when the branch closed, and I was out of a job. I started working at a fancy Fifth Ave apartment as the doorman. Had a midlife crisis at forty-five. Life went downhill after that." Seeing how the rich lived made him long for things beyond his means. He loved his wife, Rosie. She deserved the best of everything, and he wanted to give it to her, but his salary as a doorman didn't give her the lifestyle he wanted for her.

"Cards?" Jeffery asked, his word slurred.

"Horses, then sports," Charlie said. "My cell phone betting app made it easy."

Gambling seemed like the best way to achieve the life he wanted, and for a long time, he was on a winning streak. When he won, he showered her with wonderful gifts, told her to buy anything she wanted, and she seemed happy. When she asked where the money came from, he told her he'd gotten a raise and great tips. However, losing streaks made home life difficult. He and Rosie argued a lot, and he finally admitted he had an addiction to gambling and swore he'd stop. He remembered fighting over a diamond bracelet he'd bought her. She insisted he take it back, that no amount of money justified his gambling habit, and she was perfectly happy before he'd presented her with all those lavish gifts. Truth was, he felt guilty for not providing his family with the life they deserved. His father had moved from one job to another. He struggled to pay their bills and put food on the table. Charlie swore he'd never be poor like his father. Scraping life from the bottom of the barrel was not what he wanted for his family.

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

Now he wondered how his family was doing. Was his son, Ian, destined to suffer the same fate? Heart disease ran in the family. Had Rosie moved on after Charlie's sudden death?

Phil tossed his paper bag to the ground. Glass shattered. "I'm a veteran. Gulf War. Got PTSD. Drinking eased the nightmares." He wiped his face on his army jacket sleeve. "Drugs dull the pain of constant headaches and a bum shoulder." Phil was one of many veterans who couldn't cope with civilian life and lived on the streets. It was sad, really. These brave men fought for our country, some did multiple tours of duty, and now they faced this terrible fate.

The wind's sharp bite stung Charlie's cheeks as he stared up at a bright full moon. At times like this, he wondered about the Big Boss's reasoning, but who was he, a mere angel without a halo, to ponder the unknowable?

He moved away from the fire and stood in the shadows of the train trestle, close to where Emma slept. He knew about her past. His mentor, Ramiel, had filled him in. Emma's husband, despite his financial problems, spent his last forty dollars helping a little girl buy shoes for her grandmother, a good deed Charlie believed would not go unnoticed by the Big Boss above. Instead of receiving praise and good-fortune, Emma's husband, after he left the department store, never saw the taxi that struck him down.

Charlie glanced around, making sure no one noticed him, and then slipped his Smartphone from his pocket and tapped the digital keypad. Wheels in motion, he texted Ramiel. Emma met Julia. Side note: which should make the Big Boss happy. More than the usual count of homeless are going home with full bellies from Saint Ann's Soup Kitchen. I spread the word around the encampment and talked Emma into going at such a late hour, the only way I could get them to meet each other. Things are going according to plan.