

***Somewhere Between Luck and Trust* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

Some days when the morning light stole softly through the window behind Cristy Haviland's bed, she believed, just for the moments before she came completely awake, that she was still a girl in the Berle Memorial Church parsonage. Sunlight filtered through pink organdy curtains had always given her childhood bedroom a rosy glow, and so many mornings she had lain quietly and watched the color warm and brighten the room until her mother came to wake her.

There was nothing rosy about the room where she awakened now. The concrete block walls were a dingy beige, and the windows had no curtains. Nothing about her life was rosy now, but for that matter, her childhood hadn't been rosy, either. How many times had she wished she could tear down those ruffled curtains, throw open the window and drop to the ground below to begin a new life anywhere else?

Now she knew that sometimes, wishes came true.

Although some occupants of the room were beginning to stir, the woman on the bunk above Cristy's was still sleeping. From the shaking of the bed and the groans, Cristy knew her bunkmate was having a nightmare. Nightmares were as ordinary here as sobs punctuating the darkness, and angry words punctuating the daylight. It wasn't possible to jam thirty-six women together and force them to share narrow bunks and lockers, not without outbursts. Add day after monotonous day, when heat, hunger, and exhaustion drained away whatever humanity had been left them.

Put it all together and that was life in the North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women.

Fully awake now and all senses in gear, Cristy sat up quickly. Another woman was approaching her bed, sliding her feet along the floor like a skater. When the woman's face came into view, she went limp with relief. Cristy made room beside her, and Dara Lee, who slept against the far wall, heaved her considerable bulk on to the mattress.

"You remember you be leaving today?" Dara Lee asked.

Cristy gave one shake of her head. "Not when I first woke up. I kinda feel like I've lived here all my life."

Dara Lee had a rich, throaty laugh. She was dark-skinned, dark-haired and plump cheeked, a cheerful face marred only by a jagged scar that went from the corner of her left eye to the corner of her mouth. Even early in the morning she smelled like prison issue soap and the precious jasmine-scented oil she used to condition her hair.

"You just passing through, girl. You been here, what, six months?"

"Eight," Cristy said.

"You'da been here less, you cooperated more. You my kind of girlfriend."

Cristy had to smile at that. Had the word "girlfriend" been uttered by some of the women in this dorm, it might have struck fear in her heart. But Dara Lee had befriended her in her first months in prison for what seemed like no good reason at all. Cristy had her theories, though. Maybe after taking one look at the new fresh-faced white girl, Dara Lee had known that Cristy needed a few lessons in survival. Or maybe Dara Lee just missed her own daughter, who was twenty-two, like Cristy, and hadn't been to visit for years.

"You gonna miss it here?" Dara Lee asked.

"It's not so bad. I'll miss you for sure."

"You say that, but you'll forget all about me before long . I seen it happen over and over. If you remember your friends, then you got to remember this place. And maybe it's not so bad, but maybe it's not so good, either. It's for sure not a place you want to think about when you're outside."

"How much longer do you think you'll be here?"

"Long enough to get gray and lose all my teeth."

That, like so many things here, seemed profoundly unfair. During an episode of particular brutality at the hands of an abusive boyfriend, Dara Lee had shot and killed the man who had fathered her two children. The abuse had been chronic. Ten years later she still wasn't sorry for anything—except not getting away before the police arrived.

"You'll be out before then," Cristy said. "Just don't get into fights. Don't hang out with the wrong people. Do your job, and say please and thank you to the officers."

Dara Lee hoisted herself off the bed. "You write me, you get a chance."

Cristy watched Dara Lee glide away. As hard as it was to believe, Dara Lee, who was the only friend Cristy had made in prison, had never caught on to the obvious. Cristy wouldn't be writing her. Cristy didn't write anybody. That was just part of who Cristy was.