

# **What Now, Emma Lenford?**

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## **Dedication**

To all the Emma Lenfords out there; Gracie Hart would be proud.

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## It's Just Begun

"Okay..."

Mr. Mortinez's deep voice was barely even audible underneath the roar of chatter that currently filled the room around me.

"Em," I could hear one of the numerous voices seem to direct itself towards me. I looked up from the backpack that I had previously thrown onto the desk in front of myself as it spoke out once again. "Emma!"

I sluggishly turned my head to the left, where the owner of this particular voice sat.

"Hey, Emma," Grayson half-yelled out, his eyes locked directly on mine. "Check it; I get to leave early today."

He then pulled out a bright blue piece of paper, which happened to be folded a few too many times, and waved it by the side of his face.

And, if you aren't from my school, which I assume everybody who isn't a fourteen to eighteen year old in Tacket County, Wisconsin isn't, then to inform you: a blue slip of paper is your only ticket *out* during the seven hour period of in-service time we spend here every week from Monday to Friday. Unless, of course, there's an unintentional fire, or an active shooter roaming the hallways, or something of that kind of sort. I say unintentional fires only, though, because all eight hundred teenaged students that go here can recall the 'Great Blaze of Valentine's Day', which occurred a little over a year ago when some nerdy kid in chemistry class set sparks to Kelsey Gordon's ponytail with a flaming flask of acetone.

Well, I guess the freshmen of this year wouldn't remember it... but, of course, they all say they do.

Anyway, it was no accident, and I would know, because *I* just so happened to be delivering a stack of biology books to Mr. Brown in *that* specific science lab at *that* specific time that it happened.

So, yeah, I saw him dump the burning acid onto Kelsey's head after she told him she 'wasn't interested in parking with him in his mom's caravan after school'. Long story sort of short, the fire ended up in a lot more spots than just Kelsey's hair and, concerningly, the fire alarms *never went off*.

However, a few months later, an *actual* accident with an open burner and a few number-two pencils in the exact same room caused a full school evacuation, so a lot of people around here obviously have their speculations.

"Nice," I commented to Grayson, raising my eyebrows along with my tone of voice to seem a bit more amused than I actually was.

"Okay, guys, the bell already rang!" Mr. Mortinez yelled out.

Immediately after his words left his tongue, the remaining conversations in the room fell to whispers.

I gazed toward where he stood, in the front of the room, and then slid my backpack to the floor under my desk as I studied his posture... captivated.

He stood in his usual one-hand-on-the-hip, one-hand-resting-on-top-of-something (which today happened to be one of the shelves of the bookstand by the chalkboard), lean-to-one-side pose. His outfit today was also his norm: dark, tight skinny-leg dress pants, black dress shoes, and a purple, button-down long sleeve shirt (though, I suppose, it's not *always* purple).

His dark eyes scanned the room from left to right from behind his slightly messy, short dark brown hairstyle and, after a few moments, he flashed a wide smile and entirely changed his attitude of voice.

"Ciao!" he greeted.

Instantly after, Kyle Ermings, who sat two rows to the right of me, yelled back to him.

"*Aloha!*"

A few others in the classroom giggled at his response, but I didn't find it particularly funny, at least, not as much as some of the other things Kyle says, so I didn't join in.

Or, actually, maybe I was staring too much at Mr. Mortinez's smile to be fazed.

To tell you something, though, Mr. Mortinez is only twenty-five years old and not a bad looking kind of guy... Okay, actually, he's really kind of *hot*. And being twenty-five makes him only eight years ahead of *me* in the game of life and my aunt and uncle are eleven years apart in age and my family's always been cool with that, at least, as far as I know, and he's originally from Costa Rica and, although I'm not, I'm currently enrolled in my second semester of Spanish and I'm determined to finish the class with my C-plus average. So, I believe I will make a fine suitor in about one and a half years from now.

And don't act like you haven't ever had a teacher crush before, either.

"Aloha, ah, yes..." Mr. Mortinez continued. "So, today I'm thinking that we could-"

"Another writing prompt?" Stella, a girl who I've found myself not to be very fond of in recent years, inquired enthusiastically from where she pristinely sat, at the very front desk of the row I, myself, sat in.

"Ah, Stella, yes," Mr. Mortinez replied, stepping forward and tapping cheerfully on her desktop.

Ugh.

I could then see Stella lean forward a little, straighten her back some (although I honestly didn't know how it could possibly become any straighter than it already was, but I suppose she's full of surprises), and stack her forearms on top of each other on her desktop.

Really, though, I don't just have a dislike for Stella only because of her preppy nature. Trust me, I don't even think Kyle, the class clown who a number of fellow classmates frown upon, is annoying, so, really, I generally like most normal people.

Stella, however, I would not particularly consider so much a *normal* person.

Here's why.

The first time I had ever met Stella Anderson, in Mrs. Whistle's fourth grade class, I smiled at her before class had begun for the first morning and said a simple 'Hi, I'm Emma!' As a response, Stella looked me over in my denim overalls, didn't speak a word, and then walked away.

I know that story isn't exactly cinema material or anything, but I assume I remember it for a reason and, anyway, *that's just the beginning*.

Another time during that same school year, Stella and I had the luck to be assigned as partners for a moderately important school project. The basis for this project was the simple concept of American history. More specifically, we had to research (AKA copy down the first paragraph of relevance from an old dusty textbook) what it was like for American pioneers to travel via covered wagons in the 1800s. If you don't grasp what I'm talking about so far, Google the Oregon Trail. Or just go back to fourth grade.

Anyway, I was fortunate enough to be paired with Stella and, being the kind and friendly soul that I am, I greeted her after the teacher had placed us together and allowed us to roam into the empty hallway alone with our books. I must have said something like 'hey, Stella,' or 'ready to do this project?' or... well, I'm not really sure, but that would have made sense. Anyway, Stella took one glance at my smiling, cheerful expression, and then burst out in tears. She also screamed out 'you're not Abby!' and actually *threw* her two-hundred page textbook at my face. And it was a pretty big book for a ten year old to take to the face, so I started crying, too. After that, she only halfway stopped her tears, looked at me, said 'I don't wanna ever be like you,' and ran back inside the classroom. Whatever that was actually supposed to mean, I still don't really know.

Fast forward a few years because I, miraculously, didn't end up in another class with her until seventh grade, which, yeah, is right in the center of the wonderful years that most people like to call *middle school*.

And, like many other twelve year old children, I went through a little... um, 'phase'. And that *phase* was... trying to appear, to put it lightly and elegantly, as skanky and slutty to the rest of the world as I possibly could.

I watched a lot of MTV back then.

But, since I was so young and didn't even fully comprehend what words like 'harlot' or 'courtesan' really meant, *dressing* the part was all I cared about and, to me, dressing inappropriately, at the time, meant wearing a shirt with a shape cut out in the back along with a pair of colorful short-shorts that actually went just about one inch above my fingertips. Which, honestly, doesn't seem even close to a big deal nowadays but, back in seventh grade in the small, conservative town I still reside in today, that outfit was actually *scandalous*.

So, one day, I wore this particular getup during a school day in the springtime and, when I got to general mathematics class, Stella Anderson took notice of it.

'Oh, look!' she had commented to the friends she had in her 'preppy clique', a label and a phase that she obviously still holds onto today.

Anyway, I had walked up to my desk a few feet away from where she was sitting and prepared to set down my stuff when she went on to comment with 'are you going to go have a puff with your pimp daddy after school today?'

Yeah, she said that. Don't worry, though, I kept my cool.

Kind of.

After she had spoke, I whipped my head around and made sure that my shoulder-length hair was pulled smoothly forward. Then, I responded with a 'I don't even know what that means,' while keeping a hint of annoyance tinted in my voice. Of course, though, her and her two dumb, snobby friends giggled at me and she continued with 'yeah, I figured, *wannabe*.' I didn't really know what to do next, other than lunge at her and strangle her, which I didn't really want on my clean grade school record, so I just rolled my eyes, turned around, and sat down.

But it doesn't end there.

About a week after that particular incident, one of my... acquaintances, I guess you could say, approached me before third period social studies and informed me that Stella had mentioned to a few fellow classmates that I, Emma Lenford, had been seen 'smoking a joint behind the gym last Wednesday night with a twenty-three year old

man.' Which, honestly, didn't make sense as the kind of rumor that Stella would make up about me, seeing how she actually knew I didn't understand what having a puff meant the previous week, but whatever.

I think she really had a thing with drug related gossip, though, because earlier that year she started a similar rumor about a guy in our class that was held back, saying that she somehow knew that him and his older brothers kept bags of cocaine in hidden compartments of each of their lockers. That accusation might not have been entirely false, though, because he ended up being kicked out of school a little after she mentioned it. I do know that at least part of the rumor wasn't true, however, because he never had any siblings.

To get back on track, though, Stella's speculations never traveled far, probably because no one ever actually cared, so my rumor fell to the curb pretty quickly. After that, she also didn't bug me again until... actually, she never did again. But she also never did apologize, either, and her outward impressions in today's days still don't settle very nicely with me.

And that's why I'm not a huge fan of Stella Anderson.

"So, today, we're going to do another short essay over the book we just finished," Mr. Mortinez continued, subtle hints of his sweet, Hispanic accent leaving his vocal cords. "Which is..."

He then stopped, stepped back, and pointed to the boy that sat next to Stella, Calvin Gregory.

"*The Icelandic Boy Who Pulled the Shark from the Pacific?*" Calvin hesitantly spoke.

Mr. Mortinez smiled and nodded, then turned around to pace over to his desk and retrieve his copy of the book that I never actually had any intention of reading.

"Yes," he began, holding the book up to showcase. "The story about... an Icelandic boy who pulls a live hammerhead shark from the Pacific Ocean on a fine Thursday morning."

Yeah, I'm glad I never read that book.

"Oh!" Stella laughed out and, even though numerous others giggled alongside her, her particular tone of chuckle was much too audible for *my* ears.

"So," Mr. Mortinez flashed another smile once everyone's laughter had subsided. "Today's writing prompt is going to deal with..."

He paused for a moment to turn around, grab a piece of chalk from the underneath the black, clean chalkboard, and inscribe the word 'irony' onto the area of the board behind his desk. He then set the chalk back down, twisted back to face the class, and threw the book he still held onto his desktop.

"*That*," he finished his statement. "So, can anyone give me some examples of *irony* in some other pieces of literature?"

A quick silence fell over the classroom.

"Well," one masculine voice started. All eyes turned towards it not after long, myself included, and I soon realized that it was Kyle volunteering a response. "I think it's kind of ironic that you're Hispanic and teach an eleventh grade *English* class."

A good portion of the class let out a laugh at his comment.

I have to admit, though, I did, too.

"Yeah," Mr. Mortinez chuckled out.

He took a deep breath, along with everyone else, and then continued to speak. "However, Kyle, I don't believe there is a book written about me out there right now." "I mean," Kyle began to respond. "I can write one for you, if you want me to."

A smaller amount of people laughed at him once more, but I restrained myself from doing so this time.

*I mean*, if anyone is ever going to write a book about Mr. Mortinez, it would obviously be *me*.

*Wait...*

"Okay, Kyle," Mr. Mortinez went on. "Based on your recent essay grades, I'm not sure you're really ready to write my biography any time soon."

A few more fits of laughter began to ring out, but he cut them short before any one of them could fully finish.

"Now, does anyone have a *real* irony from a work of literature that they'd like to share?"

Another tense silence fell upon the room, and then a hand from the desk on my right-hand side flew up and into the air.

I turned to look over at Victoria Williams as she softly answered Mr. Mortinez.

"At the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo thinks Juliet is dead when she really isn't, so he kills himself, and then, when Juliet wakes up, she decides to kill herself, too. That's ironic, isn't it?"

"Yes, actually, it is..." I could hear Mr. Mortinez declare as I looked Victoria over for a moment or two.

Unsurprisingly, I have a story to tell about her, too.

Miss Vicki and I have been in a, putting it simply enough, half-assed friendship for the past three-ish years. And, if you can't do the math, that means our whole relationship started back in middle of eighth grade, the very last year of that very unsettling time in limbo (middle school). And, as you have already been informed, it was a pretty rough period. I encountered my phase, had a shady feud with Stella, and... well, that was pretty much it, but when you're a hormonally imbalanced thirteen year old, just spilling five drops of water onto the collar of your white, crocheted-backed tee shirt can really ruin the rest of your four-class day.

That being said, just know that when I was the young whippersnapper I once was, I was always looking to gain acquaintances that I knew could easily flourish into supporting friendships, just in case those five drips ever miraculously turned into grape cool-aid.

And, obviously, Vicki became one of those acquaintances. And, for the record, no, we did not grow a bond over spilled milk, cool-aid, or any kind of beverages, but, instead... over a boy.

Yeah, I know, it sounds a bit cliché, but that was actually how we became friends. We already had conversed with each other during classes on a few sporadic occasions as well as been assigned to at least two large-scale group projects in the past so, when Vicki asked me if I knew anything... *anything* about Drew Brown, I told her I did. Oh, and to come to the small gathering of friends I had set up at my house that Friday night if *she* wanted to know.

Needless to say, she showed up, and my friends and I all explained to her everything we knew about Drew Brown's lifestyle, which wasn't much, really; the only



things I can remember us knowing was his sister's name and age (Pricilla, six), his mother's occupation (registered nurse), his favorite food (enchiladas- Kate, my friend that was with us at the time, told us she heard him declare it during an 'about me' presentation at the beginning of their seventh grade history class), and his career goal (professional baseball pitcher- not sure why, though, since, as far as we knew, he had only ever touched a baseball bat in P.E. class; I guess it's touching the ball that counts for that job, though, right?) Apparently, Vicki was extremely intrigued with this information, so she began to talk to me more during school hours and actually kept a notebook of all the tidbits I managed to give her over the next few following months. I don't even know where I got the information, though, honestly, so I'm going to assume that I just made the stuff up half of the time. He probably really did like playing Kung Fu Panda Two on his possibly existing Xbox every Saturday night with no one around but his dad and his dad's ex-girlfriend/mistress, anyway.

However, Vicki had only come over to my house another night or two after the first, and then... well, it turned into summer, and then high school started, and then she found a different clique to hang around with.

I should also mention that she began to date Billy Johnston, so she didn't really have much of a need for my updates anymore, anyway.

However, during the last half of Freshman year, Vicki and I were placed into the same Math class, and she started to acknowledge my existence once again. But, ever since then, I've only gotten a quick conversation out of her every other week or so, if both of our schedules permitted alignment.

So, yeah, our relationship has always had the potential to become great. But, like I said, we stopped putting effort into it long ago.

And, presently, Vicki was turning her head towards me as I was slowly becoming aware that I had been staring at her for a good minute or so already.

Hurriedly, I averted my eyes to the leg of a desk that sat behind her head.

"And so, when that happens, it is considered situational irony..." Mr. Mortinez's sweet voice echoed through the room, over my obviously distracted attention.

"Emma, you okay?" I could hear Vicki's voice whisper immediately after.

I blinked a few hard times and carefully turned my gaze back towards her.

"Oh, yeah," I mumbled back. "Sorry, just... staring off into space, I guess."

Vicki pushed the corners of her red-tinted lips into a smile, and then returned her dark brown eyes back to the front of the room. I followed her gaze and soon returned my attention to Mr. Mortinez.

"So, since you guys should get the gist," he said as he, apparently, finished writing his last bullet point, *dramatic irony*, on the black board. "I'll go on ahead and hand out your first paper for today."

He then put his white chalk down, turned to his desk, and reached down to sort through a stack of papers atop it. As he did so, a number of quiet conversations broke out across the classroom.

"*Em*," a familiarly deep voice muttered beside me.

I craned my neck to see Grayson speaking to me once again.

"We're still on for Friday after school, right?" he asked. "You, me, and Ashlee?"

I had to squint at him momentarily before I could respond; it took me a while to remember that we were supposed to be meeting at my house this Friday night to binge-

watch every episode of the second season of Jersey Shore and force Gray to take a shot of chocolate milk every time Snooki said the word 'bitch'.

To make things more understandable, we three got into Jersey Shore on accident last time there was a get together at my house (Ashlee dared me to watch the entire first episode without laughing at anything... I lost that bet as soon as I heard Deena's introduction), and Grayson is lactose intolerant.

"Oh, yeah," I, eventually, managed out. "Yeah, I forgot, but I... then I remembered, yeah."

I nodded my head and forced out some sort of a smile.

Gray then looked me over, didn't say another word, and turned back to face the front of the room.

Usually, he ends up chatting my ear off about some new video game he rented the day before or how annoyed he got by Mrs. Handler's hundredth, twenty minute abstinence speech in Health class every chance he gets, but, for whatever reason, he wasn't in the mood to do that today.

I glanced forward once again and caught a glimpse of Mr. Mortinez beginning to hand out papers to the front of the row of desks on the far left. I watched him contently as he repeated his motions with the next few lines, and then jumped a little under my skin when he got to the front of the row directly to my left and Grayson yelled out beside me.

"Mortinez!" he shouted, holding up his magical blue slip of paper.

"Go ahead," our teacher responded to him while he started to pass out a thin pile of papers to the front of my row.

I heard Grayson rummage through his backpack for a second, and then speak towards me.

"See you later, Em."

I looked over at him as I took two papers from the boy sitting in front of me, Cory Truman.

"Bye, Gray," I said.

I twisted my upper body to hand one of the papers to the girl that was falling asleep behind me, Lily Fischer. I smiled as I gave it to her; she grinned back a bit. She seemed to be a really nice person, but her eyes were always half-closed every time I saw her, so I never really tried to force any kind of chat with her, *ever*.

I turned back in my seat and flickered my eyes down to the remaining paper in my hands. The top line of it held the printed words 'DETERMINING LITERARY DEVICES' and the paragraph that followed it was far too lengthy for me to focus on in that moment, so I proceeded to look back upward as Mr. Mortinez continued to speak.

"Now, my intelligent little children," he began as he walked back to the side of his desk. "I'd like you to read through this paper for a few minutes and try to write some examples of the literary devices on the back, and then I'll pass out the guides for today's writing prompt. Sound good?"

A few groans erupted out, and then a few 'okays', and then a long moment of silence.

I looked around at the number of fellow students around me, noticed that every single one of them were currently focusing at the task set before them, and then decided to follow suit and glanced back at the paper in front of me.

I tried to focus on the first word of the paragraph I needed to read, but... I just couldn't.

I glanced back up, saw Mr. Mortinez take a seat behind his desk, and then quietly stood. I swiftly made my way over to him, through the thin pathway between the desks ahead, which felt more like a minefield of textbooks and bags, and, after that, walked up to the frontside of the teacher's desk.

He glanced up at me and gave that sweet smile.

"Yes, Miss Lenford?" he questioned of me.

"May I," I began. "Please go to the restroom?"

I forced an exaggerated smile back at him, and then went on, after a quick second without an answer.

"I said *may*, not *can*, you know."

Mr. Mortinez gave me the slightest little laugh.

"Take the pass," he said, pulling out a green lamented slip of paper that said, get this, 'Hall Pass' on its frontside from underneath a stack of books on the corner of his desk.

He held it out to me, and I took it gently.

"Thank you," I responded, smiling, again.

I paused for a moment to watch him glance back down at his papers, studied his delicate, long tan fingers... and then shook my head out its trance, turned to the right, and paced around the front of the classroom. After that, I walked up to the closed door at the back of the room, opened it quietly, and then stepped into the hallway on the other side before softly closing it behind myself.

I turned right, again, and stepped up to the corner ahead, passing by another closed classroom door in the process. After that, I strode my way down the next hallway, hearing nothing around but the sound of my sneakers squeaking against the tiled floor under me.

I walked swiftly until I reached the open entrance to the women's restroom at the very end of the corridor, and then paced into it, looked around, noticed that all five stalls placed in front of me were vacant, and chose to enter the one in the very middle.

I threw my hall pass onto the top of the tampon-filled trashcan that sat on the ground beside the toilet and turned around to pull down both my bootcut jeans and bright purple lace panties. Once I sat myself upon the toilet seat, then, I... well, I peed.

For a little while.

As soon as I was finished urinating, though, a loud, odd beep rang out throughout the area, one of which I had never even heard before. Following that, a deep, almost robotic male voice spoke out over what I assumed to be the school intercom.

*"Attention, students, please initiate a code red lockdown; this is not a drill; I repeat, please initiate a code red-"*

And then the voice just got cut off, without warning. Whoever was saying it also sounded pretty calm, given the statement that he was giving.

Then again, it probably could have just been a recording.

During the time that I heard that declaration of emergency, though, I didn't know exactly what to do or think, at least at first. I ended up staring at the stall door in front of me for a long moment, and then, once the silence that followed the alarm fell, it hit me.

"Oh, God," I spat out.

I immediately threw my hands up and twisted to the toilet paper dispenser on my right. I then flung my fingers towards it, hurriedly wrapped a bundle of the tissue around them, scooped myself onto the edge of the toilet seat, and proceeded to... okay, you know what.

After that, I jumped up to a stand and wiggled my pants back into place while the toilet automatically flushed itself behind me, a little too loudly. I turned towards the door, moved the lock to the side, and pushed the door quickly out in front of myself. I then stumbled out into the open space of the bathroom and rushed into the direction of the door.

Before I got there, however, I stopped myself in my tracks and realized a number of things.

First, there was a high possibility that someone with a gun or similar lethal kind of weapon was roaming the hallways of my school and, therefore, could very likely have been outside of the restroom I was currently residing in.

Second, even if I made it through the hall safely and quickly enough to get back to my class, the door to it would probably be closed and locked and no one would be allowed past it, including harmless little me.

Third... there was no possible way that I was either brave or fit enough to sprint from here to the closest point of exit in this school in order to get anywhere safer.

So, naturally, I spun right back around and ran to the most secure place I could currently get to, which was the stall farthest away from the bathroom's doorless entrance.

I threw myself into the tiny cubical of safety, and then turned to shut its blue, paint chipped door behind myself. I fiddled with its loose fitted lock a moment and, after that, spun back around and looked the toilet in front of me over a brief second before raising one of my white Converse shoes up to its rim.

And, of course, the toilet rumbled and echoed the all too noisy sound of flushing throughout the small room as I did so.

"Sh," I mumbled out as I hoisted my second foot onto the edge of the seat as well.

I staggered around for a few moments into a position where I was crouching on top of the toilet while holding onto the empty paper holder as the toilet yelled out with another annoying flush.

"Shut up, shut up," I whispered.

Ignoring me, it did it again.

I tightly shut my eyes and froze my body.

I took a deep breath.

And then toilet finally fell to silence.

But then, after a few moments, I heard something else.

*Noise. Shuffling. Footsteps.*

I shot my eyes back open as the soft patter of steps drew nearer, sounding like they were echoing through the very bathroom I was in.

And then a deep voice whispered out.

"Emma?"

I bit my lip.

The shuffle of shoes came even closer.

"Em?"

I glanced slightly down and saw a shadow cross the floor a few feet in front of the door I was hiding behind.

My body began to tremble a bit.

The shadow stopped and I could see the tips of a pair of large, bright blue tennis shoes turn towards me from underneath my stall door.

I glided my eyes back up to center, and then looked over the lock to the door in front of me.

I had two options at this point.

First, I could remain where I did and pray to God that whoever or whatever was outside calling my name went away and didn't attempt to assassinate me or, second, I could rip the door wide open and fight like Sandra Bullock taught me to in *Miss Congeniality*.

And... I picked option two.

Immediately, I whipped one arm out to the lock on the door and grabbed at it with my fingertips. After that, I swung the heavy door inwards, threw my head upward, and actually flung my body outwards.

"*Ah!*" I screamed out as I jumped from the toilet and lunged my body towards the tall, sloppily dressed boy that stood in front of me.

I fell into him and threw my right fist back, although we both crashed to the ground before I could swing it forward. Once on the floor, though, I pulled myself hurriedly up to my knees and crawled my way close to his side. I then retracted my hand once more, but froze up when his head turned to look at me.

"*Emma, no!*" he yelled out.

I searched his expression for a second.

It was Grayson.

I cocked my head to the side a little and brought my fist down, just a little.

"W-What are you doing, Gray?" I stuttered out.

He brought his hands up in front of his chest, a look of defense.

"Calm down, Em," he said, now pulling himself up to a sit.

I stared at him while he stood completely up.

"But, you're... what are you doing, um, *here?*" I interrogated.

Without answering me, Grayson turned and reached a hand down to me. I looked it over for a long second, and then took it and pulled myself up to a stand beside him. After that, he twisted around and stepped over to the side of the sink a few feet away.

He bent over, and then swiped a *gun* from the ground underneath it.

"W-Whoa," I shot out, my body unconsciously taking a step back as I did so. "What the *hell* is that, Gray?"

He turned back around to face me and stepped into my direction, the black pistol down by his side.

"You know what... what that *is*, right?" I went on.

I squinted up at his face as he took another step toward me and finally spoke.

"Em..." he began.

"What are you doing, Gray?" I shouted out, my body actually shuttering at the volume of my words at the same time.

"Emma, hush!" he yelled back, halting about a foot in front of me.

I took a heavy breath and locked my eyes onto the weapon that he held.

"I need your help," Grayson continued.

I threw my eyes back up to his face.

"With what?" I snapped. "With... With..." I threw my hands up from my sides. "A killing spree, huh? Is that... is that *what?*"

Gray fell quiet.

"You..." I proceeded. "You can't just go around shooting people!" I paused. "You... know that, right? Right, Gray?"

I could feel a cold kind of sweat break out over my body.

"Emma, calm down," he soothed. Or, at least, attempted to.

"No, Gray, I'm not gonna... I... I can't," I spat out as I shook my head. "What do you even think you're *doing!*"

"Emma... I didn't tell you anything because I knew you'd freak out," Gray began.

"And I'm not gonna *actually* shoot anybody... So, just calm down, okay?"

I took a heavy breath and glared at him for a second.

And then a slightly but not quite really familiar male's voice piped up from somewhere behind me, although it sounded pretty muffled.

*"Attention, everyone, the code red lockdown has been lifted; I repeat, the lockdown has been lifted. Please resume normal activities."*

I whipped myself around as I heard the statement it gave, and then realized that it was coming from the school intercom once more. After it finished, I twisted slightly back to Grayson and shook my head again.

"*What* is going on?" I questioned, feeling a small amount of tension begin to form in the back of my throat.

"I need your help," Grayson answered. "I have it all planned out... I was gonna text you to come meet me during class... but then I saw you go to the bathroom, so I decided to change it a bit and see you now." He paused. "So, um, I need your help, now..."

I waited for him to continue, but he didn't.

"So, let me get this all... straight," I started, now turning completely back into his direction. "You thought it was a... a good idea to come into the girls' bathroom and scare the..." I stopped to take a breath. "To *scare* me... and show me your... your *gun* and tell me you need 'help' with... with..."

I stopped, again, and threw my hands up to cover my mouth. I tried to take another deep breath, but it didn't lower my blood pressure like I needed it to.

I closed my eyes, and then let out a scream underneath my palms.

"Emma!" Gray yelled out.

I opened my eyes to see him rush up to me and grab both of my shoulders, his god damn gun still in one hand at the same time.

I ceased my scream and threw my arms down.

"Okay, now, listen," he commanded.

"No!" I shouted back, craning my neck to glance at his weapon. "God, give me that!"

I then reached my right hand across my body and wrapped its fingers around the barrel of the pistol he held. I tried to yank it away from his grip, but it wouldn't budge.

"Let go!" I ordered.

"Emma, stop!" Gray yelled back, now pushing against my shoulders, forcing me to suddenly tumble backward.

I threw both of my arms back down to my sides and threw my gaze up at him as he released me from his grasp and let me stumble back a few more steps from him.

And then he raised his gun upward to point at *me*.

I looked him over for a moment and felt a cold sensation rush to my head.

Actually, no, more like to my stomach.

"Okay, now, you're gonna help me, Emma... okay?"

I tried to push the feeling away... but it wasn't going anywhere.

"We're gonna go back to English class, okay?" Grayson continued.

I didn't respond and placed my hands over my abdomen.

"And then... well, we'll go from there, okay?"

I could feel my stomach begin to churn and cramp up a bit.

"Okay, Emma?"

I stood still and remained silent while, I'm sure, my face turned a pasty white.

"Whatever," Grayson went on. "Come on."

He suddenly took a step forward and reached out to snatch up one of my wrists. He then hurried past my side and forced my body to whip around, making my stomach clench even more. After that, he forged his way to the bathroom entrance dragging me close behind.

As we stepped out to the hallway, I felt a burning sensation very faintly manifest itself deep in my chest.

I lowered my eyes to where his hand held my wrist and really tried to remember the last time Grayson had ushered me around like a dog that didn't want to go out in the rain... or, maybe more accurately, one that was *trying* to avoid dangerous situations.

Well, I guess there was the one time that we were at Cedar Point and Grayson wanted to ride The Dragster, but no one would go on it with him, so he decided to just grab my wrist and... well, *drag* me to my doom. I guess I may have survived it, but even that was probably a lot less risky than whatever dumb thing he's planned now.

But, before I knew it, we had already turned the corner at the end of the hall and were beginning to approach the closed door of Mr. Mortinez's classroom.

Gray pulled me up to his side and stationed me directly in front of the gated passage.

"Now," he whispered as I twisted my head into his direction. "Just go in..."

I stared at him for a short moment and took a shaky breath.

His gun was back down by his side.

"I swear I won't hurt anyone, Em," he went on to assure. "It's just... I have to tell Kyle and his friends a few things."

Still holding back the need to upchuck the breakfast that I never ate, I tilted my head a little and replied to him softly, my voice cracking a tad in the process.

"I don't think you should do this... This isn't the way to... to-"

"Just open the door, Emma," he cut me off with nearly gritted teeth.

I brought my gaze down to the floor by my feet and froze up for a long second.

"Open the door," he repeated.

I reached one hand up to the door handle and attempted to twist it. However, it didn't move much, so I released it and glanced back at Gray.

"It's locked," I mumbled.

Then, suddenly, he threw one hand in front of me and delivered four harsh knocks to the door, right next to the shaded slit of a window in it.

I could feel my heart begin to pound as he stepped back from the side of the doorframe.

I stood still for a moment, and then jumped in place when I heard the door knob noisily turn. The door then creaked open by just a few inches, and a quiet feminine voice spoke up from the other side.

"*Who is it?*"

I took another shaky breath and answered.

"E-Emma."

"Emma *who?*" the voice interrogated.

I squinted my eyes and paused before replying.

"Uh, Emma Lenford."

And then the door whipped completely open in front of me.

I looked up and saw, of course, Stella Anderson standing on the other side.

"Emma, you don't look so good," she commented as she looked me over.

"I'm-I'm fine," I stuttered out, now taking a step towards her.

She stepped back to let me through but, before I could walk any farther, a sharp cramp abruptly overwhelmed my stomach.

The burning in my chest worsened.

"Oh, God," I muttered, hurriedly turning to the right and throwing one hand over my mouth.

This time, though, I wasn't doing it to conceal a scream.

Immediately, I dropped down to my knees and grabbed the trashcan that was very luckily placed right next to the door.

And then I let out a gagging sound, along with a rush of bitter tasting acid.

At the same time, I heard Stella let out a high-pitched scream from behind me, followed by the sound of the classroom door slamming shut.

Once my stomach felt relieved enough, I leaned back on my heels and let go of the rim of the trashcan.

But then I heard Grayson's voice yell out.

"Everybody stay right where you are!"

A slow pounding began to pester my temples as I twisted my head to the side and glanced up to see him step past the empty desk beside me, his gun lifted up from his chest. I guided my eyes to the scratchy carpet by his feet, and then heard him go on.

"Sit down, Stella... If I see anyone with a cell phone out, I'll shoot it right out of your hands."

I listened to the shuffle of footsteps nearby, and then decided to carefully push myself up to a stand.

I glanced over at Grayson, who was now facing the organized arrangement of desks in the room, and then over to everyone sitting in them, seeing countless expressions of shock and speechlessness.

You couldn't blame them, either.

Grayson flickered his eyes back over to me.

"Come over here, Em," he commanded.



I looked back down at my feet and proceeded to step up to his side, not once glancing back up at everyone else in the room, even after I had reached it.

And then, a bit unexpectedly, Grayson put his free arm around my shoulder.

"Okay, now, first..." he continued. "*Kyle...* come here."

I finally looked up and saw everyone turned around in their seats, staring directly at Gray and I. I slowly brought my eyes over to where Mr. Mortinez sat, behind his own desk, his face and body just as frozen as everyone else's.

"M-Me?" a soft voice asked from somewhere across the room. I flickered my eyes over to where I thought it had come from and saw Kyle leaning his head into the aisle between his desk and the row next to it.

"Yes, *you*, Kyle, come here!" Gray shouted out.

I shuddered a little at the volume of his voice, and then watched as Kyle stood and walked quickly towards us, past the other three people sitting behind where his desk was.

"Okay, now, Kyle..." Grayson went on, once Kyle had halted a foot directly in front of us. "I want you to tell Emma *exactly* what you said about her last weekend... and then apologize."

*Um... what?*

Kyle looked back at Gray, almost dumbfounded.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he shot out.

"Oh, I think you do," Gray countered, now readjusting his grip on his gun.

"I swear, I didn't say anything about her!" Kyle yelled out.

"Last chance, Kyle, tell her."

I looked hurriedly between both of them, and then Kyle took a deep breath and confessed.

"Okay, yeah," he began, now turning his attention to me. "Emma, I..." His voice trailed off for a long moment before he found it again. "I'm sorry, but... I... started a rumor about you at Penelope's house; I... I texted a bunch of people and told everyone that I had seen you making out with your cousin. But, I'm sorry, okay? I'm really, really sorry!" He turned back to Grayson. "There, okay?"

"That's not all you said," Gray said.

"But, it was!" Kyle protested.

I looked over at Gray and saw him cock his head to the side and give Kyle a glaring look.

"Okay, okay," Kyle went on, pulling my attention back to him. "Emma, I also told them... that you're pregnant... and I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Gray fell silent, and I glanced back over at him to see him reveal a slight smirk.

"It's fine," I finally piped up, now refocusing onto Kyle's expression. "It's fine, Kyle, I don't-I don't care..." I shot my eyes back at Gray. "He's fine, Gray; it's fine."

He ignored me and continued to stare coldly at Kyle.

"Well, Kyle," he began again. "Now that we know *you know* how to lie... tell me the truth."

Again, *what?*

"About what? What are you talking about?" Kyle questioned.

"I think you know," Gray shot back.

Kyle paused for a long moment, and then responded.

"I... I don't know..."

I turned back to Gray and spoke up.

"He doesn't know, Gray, please stop; let him go."

Gray finally looked towards me.

"He knows, Emma, trust me," he countered.

"*What* does he know?" I asked.

Gray looked back at Kyle.

"Tell us, Kyle," he pushed.

"About what?" Kyle repeated.

"Just tell us!" Gray shouted.

"Gray!" I yelled out, snatching his attention back to me. "He doesn't know; leave him alone!"

Gray glared at me for a long period of time.

"Oh, so you're on his side, now?" he accused.

"I'm not on anyone's side," I spat back. "I'm just trying to-"

Suddenly, Grayson grabbed my arm and tugged it towards Kyle's direction.

"Get over there with him, then!" he yelled, cutting my sentence short.

I stumbled up to Kyle's side as Grayson threw my arm down and let go of me. I then looked up at Grayson and saw him aim his gun toward *both* Kyle *and* myself.

I fell quiet as Gray continued on with whatever he was pestering Kyle about.

"I know you didn't say any of those things about Emma, Kyle; you never said *anything* about her... You made that up on the spot. This isn't the first time you've made up a lie on the spot, either... So, now, I want you to think back a little bit. Is there anything you'd like to confess as being *false*?"

"Come on, man, that's not fair," Kyle protested, rightfully so.

"Neither is what you said," Gray grumbled, now retightening his fingers around the handle of his pistol.

"But, I..." Kyle began, but then trailed off once more.

"Can you give him a hint?" I piped up in an attempt to speed up the interrogation.

Gray looked in between both Kyle and I.

"Come on, Gray," I decided to continue. "It's hard for him to remember *anything* he might have said when there's..." I paused and pointed to the gun still in his hand.

"*This* being pointed at him... At least give him a hint or... something."

"Fine," Grayson agreed after a moment, and then turned back to Kyle. "Does *Mike Cramer* ring any bells?"

"What?" Kyle softly questioned, his voice more confused than anything.

And, contrary to what you may currently be thinking, I did not actually recognize the name 'Mike Cramer'.

"The Facebook page?" Gray went on. "The videos? Pictures? Come on, Kyle, don't play dumb..."

"I don't..." Kyle started, but then trailed off again.

"This..." I picked up for him, grabbing Gray's attention once more. "This is... all about a *Facebook page*?"

"Yes, Emma, it is!" Grayson shouted back. "And I know Kyle and his friends did it, so could you just shut up, please, for five seconds and let me get it taken care of!"

I stared at him for a long moment before replying, much more softly than he had, I should add.

"Gray... why didn't you... why didn't you just tell me about... about whatever is going on before all of this?"

"Because, Emma, I knew... I knew..." he looked away for a moment, and then glanced back and turned his weapon onto me. "Go sit down."

I felt my heart jump over a beat as I searched his face with wide eyes.

"I said go sit down!" he reiterated.

I brought one hand up to touch my cheek and spun myself around. I flickered my eyes up to meet the rest of the small class and scanned each of their faces quickly; everyone looked as frozen and shocked as they had a few minutes ago. I then looked back down to the floor, brushed a part of my long brown hair behind my ear, and stepped up to the back of the row of desks closest the door. I afterward made my way past a number of vacant seats in the line, stopped about halfway between the back and front of the room, and looked up to see the great Stella Anderson sitting directly in the desk in front of me with absolutely no one else practically around.

I heard Grayson talk once more as I searched her posture, which was turned towards the aisle between the empty row she sat in and the mostly empty row beside her, and her facial expression, which looked somehow both emotionless and on the verge of screaming at the same time.

"If you don't tell me what you know about it, then I'm going to have to get someone else up here that'll confess for you," I could hear Gray say.

I looked blankly back at Stella's face, and then grabbed the edge of the desk behind her and lowered myself to sit in it.

"I swear to God, I don't know anything about it!" Kyle yelled out.

At the same time that he spoke, though, Stella leaned forward and whispered to me.

"What the hell is going on?"

I placed my elbows on the desktop and pushed my fingers against my temples as I looked up at her with blurry eyes, now noticing that her pink eyeshadow-caked eyelids were mere centimeters away from mine.

"Wish I knew," I answered, trying my best to remain quiet, although I didn't care enough to lower my voice as *much* as she had.

"Well... let's ask Trever about it, then," Gray went on from somewhere behind my back. "Trever, get up here!"

I kept my eyes on Stella while she pounded me with another question, although she more mouthed her sentence than anything this time.

"What's the Facebook page?"

I shook my head a little at her as the rustling of footsteps echoed throughout the room.

"I don't know," I mumbled.

"Trever, anything *you'd* like to confess?" Gray went on.

"Was it of Mike Cramer?" Stella continued to mouth to me.

"I-I'm sorry, Grayson, I... I don't know, either," I could barely hear Trever's voice stumble out.

Trever Minger, by the way, is one of the star players of the Central Talket High School Boys' Basketball Team, which actually finished its season this year with a record streak of seven losing games in a row... so, he was a terrible player, but he was also the best of the worst this town had to offer, I suppose.

He's also one of Kyle's 'right-hand men', if you will, so that should explain why he's apparently Grayson's second target for whatever purpose he was enraged so destructively about.

"I guess," I mouthed back to Stella, sort of giving in to the silence of the rest of the room.

"You don't? Oh, really?" Gray pressed.

"I think I've seen it," Stella responded.

"Seen what?" I shot back, both of us still half-mouthing everything we said.

"Grayson, we're really sorry," I heard Kyle butt-in. "But, we don't wanna lie; we don't know what you're talking about."

"The *profile!*" Stella answered me, her voice poking through a bit to convey the urgency of her words.

"Gr-Grayson," a familiar, but different, deeply masculine voice suddenly jumped through the room. I shot my head into its direction and saw Mr. Mortinez standing at his desk, now clearing his throat and going on to speak. "I think you need to put that down..."

He held one hand out in front of himself, palm-down, as a gesture towards Gray. I took a slightly deep breath as I watched him stare across the room.

Oh, my savior...

Just then, though, Stella tapped my arm and forced my attention back to her.

"I've seen it," she mouthed. "It's a profile someone made to make fun of Grayson."

"Not yet," I heard Gray shoot back at Mr. Mortinez. "I'm not finished yet!"

"What was on it?" I whispered to Stella, at the same time that Grayson yelled out.

"Bad stuff," was the insightful reply she gave me. "Kyle didn't make it, though."

"Grayson," Mr. Mortinez went on. "Please... put that down, and then we'll talk about this..."

"How do you know?" I asked Stella.

"Because he couldn't have gotten the pictures on there," she shot back.

"I... I don't think that's gonna work," Grayson said.

"Why not?" I went on.

"Because," Stella paused and tilted her head a little. "They were... *Grayson's... dick pics...*"

I stared at her for a long, long moment, and then turned my body around to face Grayson's direction as he continued to argue with Mr. Mortinez.

"Kyle *knows* what he did... and he needs to admit it... and *stop* lying."

I looked to the gun in his hand and saw that it was beginning to tremble with his grip.

"He... He..." he went on, his voice starting to shake as well. "He needs to pay..."

Again, I had two options: either sit silently next to Stella Anderson, whom I, in any normal situation, couldn't stand to be in the presence of for more than sixty-five seconds and watch as the person I once thought to be one of my best friends shot a fellow

classmate in the chest in front of twenty other people or, secondly... do what Miss Congeniality would do. *Something*.

I shot up to my feet.

"Gray!" I shouted, and then watched as Grayson looked over at me from behind his shoulder. "I'm... I'm so sorry... It was... It was *me*; I made the... the Facebook page."

I threw my arms up to my sides, and then slapped them down to my thighs.

"Emma, n-" he started to quickly respond, but I cut him short just as quickly.

"I'm sorry Gray, but it wasn't Kyle... or Trever," I went on, now stepping toward the back of the room once again. "It was me."

"No, Emma, it wasn't," I let him reply.

I made my way around the last desk in the row beside me and continued to carefully approach where Grayson, Kyle, and Trever all stood.

"I know you don't want to believe it," I argued. "But it really was..."

"No, Emma, I know it wasn't you," Gray shot right back, shaking his head. "It couldn't have been you."

I stopped pacing a few feet away from his side.

"But, it was, Gray; it was!" I pushed.

"No," he shook his head, again. "I know it wasn't."

"And how do you know that?" I nearly yelled back.

"B-Because," he started to stutter out. He paused and snapped his head from me, to Kyle, to Trever, back to me, and then to Kyle once more. His hand holding the gun was still pointed at him, and it was beginning to shake once more. "Because... Because..."

He gritted his teeth and showed an intensely angry expression, one of which I had never actually seen before, and then shouted out.

"*Arg!*"

And then an extremely loud *bang* rang out through the room.

I jumped in my place as nearly everyone else in the room let out a piercing scream.

I shot my eyes from the gun to Kyle, who was now grabbing at his left ankle and hunching over, himself shrieking out as well. I glanced back at Grayson and saw him start to re-aim his weapon, still towards Kyle.

"Grayson!" I screeched out, immediately lunging towards him.

"*Ugh!*" he yelled out, again, right at the same moment that I threw myself into him.

Another loud sound erupted in the room as I pushed Grayson to the ground and toppled on top of him.

My ears rang out in pain as I glanced up and saw the gun thrown into isolation, about a foot away from my side, on the floor. I brought myself up to my knees, now sort of sitting on top of Grayson's stomach, and then looked back down to his face underneath me.

"I'm sorry, Em," he whispered.

Immediately after his words left his mouth, though, he threw both of his hands up to sides, and then seized me by my shoulders. He afterward jerked my body to the side, away from the gun's direction, and shoved me backward.

I gasped as I toppled over and flung my head back to smash against the hard metal leg of a nearby school desk.

I let out a tiny whine and closed my eyes while my body rolled into a ball and onto my side.

I reached both of my hands up to touch the throbbing bruise that was now forming on the back of my head as a number more cries echoed throughout the room.

I fell still and tried to take a few deep breaths.

And then I shot my eyes open.

I felt a sharp pain in my head injury as I pulled myself up to a sitting position. I glanced up to see a number of classmates beginning to huddle around Kyle across the floor in front of me as well as Grayson as he rushed to the closed door, his gun still in-hand.

I placed my right hand over the back of head, and then reached my other up to grab at the edge of the desktop behind me. I shakily pulled myself up to a stand and, as I did so, locked eyes with Grayson as he took one quick look back at me.

I froze as I stared at him with my blurry vision.

I saw him shake his head, and then turn back to the door, right before throwing it open and sprinting away.

I returned my gaze to the crowd forming around a moaning Kyle, and, after a few short moments, Stella abruptly appeared in front of me, her mascara actually smeared all over her cheeks.

"Oh, God, *Emma*," she uttered, her voice wavering with her words. "Why is this happening to us?"

I slid my hand down from my head.

"I don-" I began but, before I could finish, Stella threw her arms out, and then slapped them across my backside, pulling me into an abrupt hug.

"We're gonna get through this," she muttered as she held me. "The both of us... we *will*."

## Enragement

February 21st, 2017: A school shooting incident took place at Central Talket High School during a morning English class, taught by Mr. Miguel Mortinez, in which a young man shot another young man, effectively injuring him as well as a few others. The young man responsible was arrested immediately during an attempt to vacate the premises. I, Emma Lenford, verify this information to be true, as I was one of the few 'others' that were left with both a slight physical and mental injury after the incident.

March 11th, 2017: Many heads were turned as both Emma Lenford and... as odd as it would seem to most, *Stella Anderson* entered the house known to be home to Fiona Pindell and her family. A family whom, on this day, conveniently happened to be out of town and on their way to their 'pre-spring break vacation' in Miami, Florida while Fiona also conveniently happened to be 'sick with a relentless stomach bug'.

And also...

Fiona Pindell: A Central Talket Senior who had been captain of the volleyball team... until her coach discovered she had ten sandwich bags of cigarettes hidden in the bottom of her duffel bag after practice one fine day. Or, at least, Fiona had insisted that they were *cigarettes*...

"*Oh my God... Emma and Stella!*" Fiona shrieked, now running up to the side of the doorway in front of us. "You actually came!"

Yes, you just heard the names of both Emma and Stella said together in the same sentence by someone other than myself and without any negative connotations.

But, when your right-hand best friend has recently been incarcerated for extreme misconduct and threatening violence displayed during school hours and your left-hand BFF just temporarily moved back to Jamaica, *again*, then you find yourself with just your feet and nothing to do and nowhere to go and no one to see for a few too many weekends, and then you just get so bored that you actually cave to the pleas of 'emotional recovery time' *slash* 'let's see if anyone else knows absolutely anything remotely related to the "dickbook" page time' with Stella Anderson.

Oh, and if you're wondering, the left-hand bestie is actually Ashlee Neysmith, and she's actually been my closest female friend since sixth grade, when she moved to Wisconsin with her aunt *from* Jamaica; I remember her walking into class the first day that year with her cocoa curls, flawless hazelnut skin tone, and perplexing heavy, slurry accent... I stared at her from across our shared cluster of seats all afternoon until she confronted me at the bus stop after school, telling me to 'quit ya' lookin' at me before I sock ya' eye sockets, skinny little swine.'

I immediately blubbered out my apologies; she then laughed, said that *she* was sorry, and that she just loved to watch other people writhe in discomfort when confronted by such a strong individual as herself.

I was captivated by her overly-sassy personality, and then, soon enough into the school year, a beautiful best-friendship blossomed between the two of us.

Every single summer, though, she travels back to her hometown to visit with the rest of her family, including her parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and even one great-*great*-grandmother, and she goes back more often throughout the school year if there's been a sudden illness bestowed on any one of her family members. And she has a super big family, and she has some super old relatives. So, it came as an

unsurprising inconvenience when her great uncle came down with pneumonia the very day after the incident of the 21st, and has, apparently, neither recovered nor passed on to another realm as of yet.

But she's not here right now, and Stella *is*.

"Oh, yeah, well, we..." I began to respond to Fiona, but let my voice trail off, into oblivion, soon enough. At the same time, though, I scanned the large group of individuals conversing underneath the semi-pounding rap music in the hallway behind her back.

"I'm glad you guys could make it," she thanked as both Stella and I stepped through the doorway and turned toward her. "You know, after what happened..." She paused while she closed the front door behind us. "I didn't think you'd be in the partying mood, you know?"

"Oh, I know," I shot back to her. Overlapping with the 'w' on my last word, though, I heard Stella pipe up beside me.

"We wanted to come see you!" she yelled, *well* over the level of voice projection required to overcome the music and other surrounding sounds.

"Awe, really?" Fiona asked, placing both her hands overtop her heart. "You two are too sweet."

She threw her hands back down and turned to step into the hallway on our left.

"Come on, I'll get you some drinks!" she said as she began to push past the group I had observed earlier, one consisting of approximately ten or eleven people. I took a step in her trail, then, but, before I could really even think about taking another, I felt a hand grab my right shoulder.

"Emma," I felt Stella lean in and whisper to me. "I don't know if we should be here... It's making me nervous."

I forced my urge to roll my eyes and twisted to look at her instead.

"Stella," I started, my voice cool and collected. "We were invited to this party, remember? And... coming here *was your* idea, actually, so-"

"But that was *before we actually* came here," she protested, effectively cutting me short.

I stared at her for a short moment.

And *then* I rolled my eyes.

"Come on," I muttered, turning back around and continuing to follow after Fiona.

"But, Emma!" I heard her shout.

Ignoring her, I pushed on and walked by the cluster of guys and girls against the hallway wall. I swept my eyes over each face as I passed it, and flashed a subtle smile at the entire same time, even though only about forty percent of the group actually glanced back.

So, here we go.

The first one: Alan Pebble, minor football player/ benchwarmer. Second: Kate Harris, show choir performer and off/on again girlfriend to Alan. Third and Fourth: Blake Fuller and Jenna Vandereem, both also apart of the school's show choir and classic choir programs. Fifth: Lexi Johnsteen... who isn't really involved with anything or anyone else. She had the straightest hair and teeth around, though, so why she never has, I'm not entirely sure. Sixth and seventh: Brad and Frankie Miller, slightly above average baseball and softball player, respectively, as well as twin brother and sister to one



another. Eighth: Crystal Skaggs, a talented clarinet musician (from what I've been told), and absolute best-friend-for-life to Frankie. Sandwiched between nine and eleven: Miss Miranda Lively, a young woman who's managed to poke at my nerves a tad more than even Stella Anderson over the past month, with her full-of-herself attitude that I've witnessed at the table beside mine in the cafeteria during the past ten lunchtimes in a row and make-out sessions with Andrew Kremiesky in front of the locker directly to the right of mine after the final school bell every single afternoon for the past five schooldays. Number nine, then, is, unsurprisingly, Andrew Kremiesky, a new student since January from Ohio, and number eleven is Turner Gerning, a boy with brown hair so spiky that it looks like it needs to be mowed.

By the time I had reached the end of the line, my smile had faded, and I had returned my head back to a forward-looking position. Immediately after that, then, I swerved to the right and passed through an empty wide doorway, promptly entering a vast kitchen area, one that I would personally deem much too large for a family of three... but, either way, I stepped into it and made my way up to the island counter where Fiona stood, ladling a scoop of red liquid from a glass punch bowl into a red solo cup.

"Here," she directed, offering the cup into my direction.

"Oh, thanks," I pushed out. As soon as I took the beverage from her hand, I saw Stella step up to my side from the corner of my eye.

"So, um..." she went on to create tiny small talk while my eyes wandered the dark windows behind her head, where I could see a group of guys on the dimly-lit deck outside. And, as hard as I tried, I couldn't seem to make out the faces of any one of them. "*Grayson*, huh?"

I trickled my inattentive eyes back to her face and raised my eyebrows as she handed a separate cup to Stella beside me.

"Yeah?" I questioned.

"Didn't see that one coming," Fiona continued to comment, her long, dirty blonde ponytail whipping back and forth slightly as she shook her head.

"Oh," I began to shoot back. "Yeah, um, no, me neither..."

I glanced down at the slushy red liquid in the cup I held in front of myself and paused for a moment, just staring at it.

"Well, I always kind of had a feeling about him," Stella suddenly piped in.

I brought my head back to center and twisted it a tad to look right at her.

"Oh, really?" I asked her.

Before she could even respond, though, Fiona voiced her own opinion.

"Yeah, me, too," she said, temporarily stopping just long enough for me to gaze back at her. "He's kind of weird, you know?"

I opened my mouth to say something in return, but I guess I was too slow for Fiona's pace.

"I mean, I know you were kind of friends with him, Emma," she picked back up.

"But, you can't deny that he was kind of odd, can you?"

"Well..." I started to reply, my eyes wandering to the windowsill once more. "Um..." I paused for a quick moment, and then abruptly stepped to the side. "Oh my God... is that Tommy Sanchez?"

I waited for Fiona to turn around and follow my gaze outside, where it was still clearly impossible to see the faces of any individual out there.

"Who?" she asked, stepping up to the counter to have a closer look.

"Oh, you know," I answered. "That kid that does magic tricks."

"Huh?" she reiterated as I conjured up another response to her.

"Oh, yeah, he does magic stuff all the time; he's really good..." I waited for her to turn back to me before finishing. "I think I'll go see him and... you know, see what he's got *up his sleeve*..."

I studied her slightly puzzled expression for a few seconds, and then nodded at her, mumbled a little 'yeah', and turned back to the kitchen doorway.

"Wait, Emma," I heard Stella urge out.

Ignoring her, though, of course, I continued on my trek back to the hallway and turned to the right, which was an empty path that led directly to the backdoor. And, although I was certain that there was no Tommy Sanchez outside, and uncertain if one even existed, I was relieved enough to get away from my previous two companions.

I paced until I almost reached the door, but slowed to a halt when my eyes caught glimpse of a very *intriguing* piece of artwork.

I turned toward it, just a few feet away from the closed doorway, and studied the painting which clearly depicted two elderly individuals, one vividly male and one vividly female, both engaging each other in a sort of embrace, nude.

"Well, well," I muttered, raising one eyebrow as I spoke to myself.

And, just then, some type of manly voice shouted my name from a short distance away.

"Emma!"

I craned my neck back to the opposite end of the hallway, where a crowd of partiers were still huddled by the front door from which I first entered, and spotted the figure of an unrecognizable young individual jogging into my direction. I completely toward him, then, as he approached my side, took a puff of a breath, and raised his hands to his hips.

"Emma Lenford," he declared, looking me over.

I gave him a once-over myself, taking note of his deeply tanned features, light caramel hair, and casual apparel of khaki shorts and a black V-neck tee shirt.

Casual for summer, I mean, not so much for a late winter night in the depths of great Wisconsin.

"Um, hi?" I questioned, tilting my head slightly to the side.

"Oh, come on," he said. "You know who I am, Emma."

No, I don't.

Surprisingly.

"I..." I started to mumble, though he (luckily) cut me off before I could progress my words any further.

"Skyler," he said, gently nudging my shoulder with his fist at the same time that he spoke.

I opened my mouth a little and stared at his face for a moment longer before it suddenly and thankfully hit me.

Skyler Hemming: a boy who I went to school with for merely seven months during 3rd grade, had a minor crush on for about six of those seven (because it wasn't until

after he offered to let me and a few of my friends play with his pet rock during recess time on a windy October day that I realized my attraction toward him... and his cute little rock with its plastic googly eyes and painted red bowtie), and, in the short time that I had known him, had a reputation for being the most enthusiastic boy scout in town (and quite probably the *only* boy scout in town...).

"Oh, *yeah*," I partially blurted out. "Skyler, yeah, I remember you." I nodded and paused for a second. "Wow, you've... changed a lot, haven't you?"

"Nah, not really," he responded. "It hasn't been *that* long since we saw each other last."

I forced a slight smile.

"Right, yeah..." I said.

He nodded, and then glanced at the partially pornographic painting beside me.

"Wow," he began, widening his eyes at the sight. "That's... really something, isn't it?"

"Oh, yeah," I spat out, now turning myself back to the artwork. "I was just about to give Fiona my bid on it."

Skyler suddenly let out a chuckle a bit so loud and shaky it was a tad concerning.

I turned back to him and squinted my eyes while he bent over a bit and shook his head, his eyes closed, his cheeks pulled up into a smile so tightly they looked as if they'd been apart of a botox treatment gone horribly wrong.

"Oh, Emma, you always crack me up," he eventually calmed his laughter and stood straight once more.

"Um," I uttered back to him. "*Thanks?*"

"Hey, you gotta come meet some of my buds," he claimed, already turning around and taking off down to the other end of the hall.

I continued to stare, just a little confused, as he walked away, and then, after he had stepped a good yard or two away, I relaxed my eyebrows and began to follow his footsteps, my untouched drink still in-hand. I passed by (mostly) the same faces that I had crossed paths with when I had first entered the party, although I avoided eye contact with them this time around, since I'm pretty sure I knew more information about each one of their lives than the total of them knew about me, and walked a few steps behind Skyler until he turned and entered a large, empty living room area.

I stopped by a pristinely white sofa adorned with gaudy oversized orange pillows and watched Skyler's backside as he stopped to stare at the other vacant couches in the room for an uncomfortably long moment. And, even though I knew it was going to backfire on me, I couldn't help but give an attempt at lightening the suffocating silence.

"Some friends, huh?" I commented.

And, just I had predicted, Skyler turned to face me and erupted into a frightening fit of giggles.

"Oh, no, Emma," he chuckled out. "They're not in here; they're..." He fell back to a stable state once more. "They're... um..." He paused and gave a good long stare to the wall behind me before concluding. "Upstairs, probably..."

He returned his eyes to me for another lengthy amount of time, making me feel obliged to formulate some sort of response to him.

"*Oh?*" I raised an eyebrow and managed out.

He flashed a broad smile and I braced myself for another manic laughing fit but, actually, he stopped himself before he could reach it. Shortly thereafter, he turned around and stepped toward the next room.

"Come on," he mumbled as he made his way to it.

Again, I hesitated shortly before following him, but wound up chasing after him in the end for some reason.

We both stepped around the corner of the living area and turned to the right to see a long carpeted stairway, and I soon trekked up the steps close behind Skyler, the drink in my hand coming close to spilling onto my white and blue striped long sleeve top a number of times but somehow miraculously never cursing me the way I anticipated it would with the luck I have. Once at the top of the stairway, though, I paused to look around at the long hallway that extended both to the left and right as Skyler peeked into the closest open doorway.

I stepped up to his backside, quietly pushed myself up to my tiptoes to peer over his shoulder, and then saw the room was both pitch black and silent, a small stain of the light from the hallway we stood in shining on large wooden dresser inside of it.

"Not in there..." Skyler muttered, now moving to glance into the next room of the thin hallway.

I studied the chestnut colored dresser for a moment longer, and then slowly twisted back toward Skyler as he continued to mumble and hover in another doorway a few feet away from me.

"They're... uh..." he began, pausing to look back at me for a second. "Not here, I guess..." He stopped again to rock a little on his heels, throw his hands out to his sides, and force out a slightly uncomfortable laugh.

I raised one eyebrow, then one corner of my mouth, then my drink up to the side of my shoulder. After that, I proceeded to push my way up to his side and gradually gazed into the room he stood in front of, soon noting that it was a small bedroom with the overhead lightbulb within it turned on, illuminating light over the bright cyan-colored walls, crowded white desk in one corner, similarly designed dresser against another, and vacant queen bed in the center of it all, perfectly clean white sheets adorning it.

"I'm, uh," Skyler piped up once more, snatching my attention back. "Going to go to the bathroom real quick."

I searched his face for a split second before realizing he, apparently, expected a response from me before leaving for the restroom and taking care of his business.

"Yeah, go on ahead," I agreed, afterward adding a tiny forced smile for a comforting effect, since I guess it seems that's what he needed, judging by the sudden appearance of sweat beads on his tan forehead.

"Okay," he muttered. "Be... Be right back..."

I watched him as he fidgeted in place for a moment, and then while he spun around and continued to the unexplored end of the hall. After he stepped a good distance away, though, I turned back to the door beside my side and decided to step into the blue wonderland of a bedroom that laid beyond it.

Once inside, I glanced quickly around and noticed that the room was actually a lot messier than I had originally perceived. There were clothes littering the floor, a closet space so full the door to it couldn't even fully close (though I only saw that *after* I had entered; it was placed directly to the left of the room entrance and couldn't be seen from

the doorway), and stacks of books crowding a number of shelves against every inch of the walls that weren't covered with Beyonce or Kanye West posters.

And, after lowering the probability of the room belonging to either Fiona's parents or five year old brother, I figured that it was probably in the ownership of none other than Miss Pindell herself.

After this realization, then, I decided to walk up to the frontside of Fiona's dresser and scan the array of picture frames resting atop it. I took note of the photographs there depicting Fiona in her volleyball attire, a few of her riding horseback (a new piece of information regarding her interests for me, might I add), and then stopped my eyes directly on a certain one in particular at the very center of the arrangement.

"Well, well, Miss Fiona..." I whispered, now reaching out to carefully pick up the frame. After bringing it up to my nose, I more closely observed the photograph taken of Fiona in a red bikini, striking a slightly racy pose (feet at shoulder-width, one hand gently tugging the side of her bath suit bottoms downward, her head tilted back a tad), her messy blonde locks blowing back in the wind, a suggestively playful wink on her face. Most of all, though, my eyes locked onto the unnatural ratio of extremely thin waistline to exaggeratedly wide hips and bust on Fiona's curvature.

"Yeah, photoshop sure can do wonders," I commented, now setting the picture back on Fiona's dresser top, afterward allowing myself to glance down into the untouched red solo cup that I still, for whatever reason, was holding on to. I studied the slushy red liquid floating around in it for a long moment, pursed my lips for a second longer, and then cocked my head to the side a bit.

"Please be something good," I mumbled, now throwing the cup up to my lips and my head back on my neck.

Mid-sip, though, the voice of who I assumed to be Skyler made an appearance from somewhere behind my back.

"Emma..." I heard him begin.

"Hm?" I sounded out through my drink, now bringing the cup back down to my waist as I forced myself to swallow the most tasteless red water I had ever introduced to my own tastebuds. After that, I spun around on my heels and caught glimpse of Skyler Hemming in front of Fiona Pindell's bedroom doorway, kneeling on one knee.

Yes, *on one knee*.

"Um," I bumbled out as I watched him reach into his khaki shorts' pocket to retrieve a tiny black box.

Yes, *a tiny black box*.

"Emma..." he went on, now flipping the top of the box upward to reveal a silver ring with a diamond adornment carefully crafted onto the top of it.

Yes, *a silver ring with a diamond adornment carefully crafted onto the top of it*.

I drastically widened my eyes as I involuntarily listened to him go on.

"I know we've... well, we've had our ups and downs, but we've been going steady for a while now, and-"

And I immediately had to cut him off.

"*What?*" I spat out, narrowing my eyebrows and twitching my head sideways a little. "I mean..." I paused and squeezed my eyes shut while I finished. "*What!*"

"Emma Lenford, I have to ask you..." Skyler continued.

"No, no, no," I stopped him, again, and took one step toward him. "What... What do you mean we... 'going steady'! Skyler, we... I..." I started to stumble on my words a bit. "I just met you for the first time in... like, *eight years!*"

I stopped and stared at Skyler as he let out a slight giggle.

"You... You're laughing because this is a joke, right?" I started to question of him.

"Oh, Emma," he shook his head and looked to the side as he went on. "You've always been so funny..."

I squinted at him and dropped my jaw a bit before actually moving my mouth to reply to him.

"Stop..." I began, pausing after a moment to drastically raise my voice. "Stop *saying that!*"

I practically froze up as I witnessed him let out another laugh.

"God, I have to get out of here," I muttered out after another second or two, now charging at the door behind where he crouched, the drink in my hand making subtle slushing sounds the whole time I moved.

"Wait, Emma," Skyler urged out, shooting up to a stand and jumping directly in between the hallway and me before I could actually reach it.

"Skyler, *move!*" I yelled out, his face now inches away from mine.

"Please just listen to me for a minute," he began to beg.

I stopped to study his suddenly solemn expression for a moment, and then took both a step backward and a deep breath as I loosely crossed my arms.

"Fine. Go on," I said.

He flashed a short-lived smile at me, and then returned himself to one knee.

"Oh, God," I mumbled, glancing away from him for split second before he began to speak to me once more.

"Emma..." he spoke. "Like I said, I know it's been a long time coming for us... and I know I probably haven't been around for you as much as I would have liked to... but... every time I come over to see you, you're not home..."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Well, that's probably because I moved into a different house about *seven years ago*," I spat out.

"No, no," he swiftly responded. "This is your *new house*."

I gave him a sideways look for a moment.

"How... did you... get my address?" I asked.

Skyler smiled.

"You're my *girlfriend*, Emma," he stated.

I widened my eyes, again.

"And I *love* you..." he continued. "And now I have to ask... Emma Lenford, will you marry me?"

My eyes honestly couldn't have gotten any wider in that moment, so I forced them shut instead.

I took a guided breath, forced back the nauseous feeling deep in my gut, either resulting from whatever bland ingredients laced the punch in my cup or the overwhelming confusion and discomfort I felt from my situation, and thought to myself: *WWMCD?*, a.k.a. *What Would Miss Congeniality Do?*

I flickered my eyelids open and brought my gaze down to where Skyler anticipatngly knelt.

"Um..." I began, pausing to think a minute or so longer. "Will you, uh, *hold this?*"

I reached out my red solo cup to him.

He leisurely stood and took the drink, now placing a small amount of space between his backside and the open doorway to freedom.

So, I wasn't entirely sure what Miss Congeniality would have done in my given situation, but I sure as hell know what Miss Emma Lenford would do.

Run.

"Kay, thanks," I blurted out, right before I took off past his side and into the hallway.

"Emma?" I heard Skyler questioningly say my name from where he stood as I spun to the left and continued to jog to the beginning of the corridor, where I afterward threw myself around the corner of wall that led to the stairs, and then slowed myself down slightly as I trotted down the steps beyond it.

"Stella!" I shouted out while my feet reached the ground floor. Once there, I hit the floor, halted for a brief second, and looked hurriedly in both directions, where, surprisingly enough, nobody else stood.

"*Stella!*" I repeated, now turning to jog my way to the kitchen where I heard a number of loud, laughing voices come from.

And, after rounding the corner that led to it, I witnessed a crowd of people (all of whom I knew, though, of course) swarming around the kitchen island, where, apparently, Fiona Pindell was grinding her backside all over Corey Hissman, who was another lesser-known football player on the school team, on top of it while Kellie Pickler's "Red High Heels" played (oddly enough, even softer than the laughing crowd) in the background.

Only in Talket County, I guess.

I stared at the sight for a moment, then shook my head a little and stepped forward to search for Stella Anderson in the herd.

"Stella!" I yelled over the voices beginning to turn to chatter and stepped around the left side of the kitchen.

I scanned the backs of those directly in front of me, then, and, miraculously enough, spotted Stella's among them.

"Stella," I reiterated, a little more quietly this time, as I stepped forward and reached a hand out to tap her shoulder. When she didn't immediately turn around, though, I continued to tap her a tad more harshly a few more times.

"Stella, Stella, Stella," I urged out while she sluggishly spun toward me.

"Oh, *Emma*," she said, the giggly smile on her face fading away as she spoke.

"We have to leave," I spat at her. "Like, um, *now*."

She scrunched up her face at me.

"Why?" she asked.

Before I could even begin to answer her, though, an annoyingly familiar voice screamed out from my right side.

"*Emma!*"

I bit down on my lower lip and gradually craned my neck to look Skyler's way as he stopped to stand by the doorway of the kitchen, his hands wrapped tightly around the

black box he held up to the bottom of his chin, noticing that a trace amount of tears had just formed in the corners of his eyes.

"Because," I mumbled out to Stella, though I didn't take my eyes from Skyler's figure as I did so. "*That.*"

"Emma!" his voice croaked out, again, though this time it was loud enough that it actually stopped the whole room from continuing to laugh and chatter away amongst themselves.

"Great," I whispered, now flickering my eyes to the floor as I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Emma," Skyler went on, bringing my attention back to him. "Don't you... Don't you love me?"

I gradually brought my gaze from his obviously over-emotional face to the rest of the room, now noticing that *everyone* else was turned into our direction, including Fiona and Corey themselves, every single one of them blank-expressed and silent.

And, ironically enough, the music still played at a moderate volume in the back of the quietness... and, at that very moment, I could hear Kellie Pickler sing out "*I just kicked you to curb in my red high heels!*"

Fitting, right?

Leisurely, though, I turned back to Skyler and began to reply to him, since I felt I really had no other choice.

"No, Skyler, *I don't*... because I barely even *know* you."

I paused and rethought my statement, however, since the silence wasn't changing face.

"Well, okay, I *do* probably know quite a bit about you... but, I know a lot about everybody!" I fixed, now uncrossing my arms, and then twisting my head back to the confused expressions on my left.

"Well, I mean, not a *lot*," I continued. "But, like..." I paused, again, and turned toward Stella, who stood just as speechless as everyone else.

"Well, I know more about Stella," I stopped to bring out one hand, palm-up, to gesture at her. "Than... you." I finished with turning back to Skyler and moving my hand to point at him. "And I don't *love* her... I... I don't even really *like* her." I slapped my hand down to my thigh. "But that's more like... *know your enemies*... Not that *you're* my enemy or anything..." I looked back over at Stella and her squinting eyes. "Or either of you, really, I just mean..." I glanced back at Skyler, his hands still frozen on the box in between his palms.

I allowed my voice to trail away, slid my hands up to my hips, and blew a puff of air softly out of my mouth. After that, I turned back to the quiet crowd as Kellie Pickler's voice sang "*You can watch me walk if you want to, want to; I bet you want me back now don't you, don't you?*" somewhere from the backside of the room.

I studied the stunned faces of Kate Harris, Lexi Johnsteen, and Jared McConner (who was the smallest boy on the Central Tacket County High School wrestling team and had not known had been invited to this party until that exact moment, seeing how the last rumor I had heard about him was one involving him dissing Fiona in front of their whole homeroom class, claiming that the Spanish speaking skills she brought to the two's previous Español class project were, and I quote, 'unspeakably revolting, incompetent, and gut-wrenchingly downright dumb'), and then decided to go on with my



halfway hopeless speech, since none of them were obviously planning on helping my case anytime soon.

"Okay, listen to this, everybody," I said, bringing my hands down in front of my waist, face-down. "This guy..." I paused to gesture at Skyler. "I haven't even seen in... *years*, okay? Since, like, third grade or something like that..." I fidgeted in place a bit and flickered my eyes between Skyler and everyone else. "And then, just today, just *now*, I meet him for the first time again, right? And then he... he..." I threw my hands out in front of myself, face-up this time. "He *proposed* to me!" I forced out the slightest uncomfortable laugh. "How crazy is *that*, right?"

"Damn," I heard a masculine voice, though I don't know whose, spit out from God knows where in the room.

I threw my hands back down to my side.

"Yes, thank you," I replied.

I began to turn back to Skyler but, before I did, another voice spoke up from a closer distance.

"You talking *marriage*?" I turned back just in time to see the words escape the mouth of Jared McConner, standing just a few steps in front of me.

I locked my eyes onto him and nodded.

"Yeah, *marriage*," I muttered out.

"But, Emma..." Skyler piped back up, bringing my attention gradually back to him.

"No, Skyler, I don't-" I began, though he, of course, stopped me before I could actually finish.

"Emma, listen to me, please!" he shouted out, his voice sounding desperate and almost crackly, kind of like an old witch or drunk plumber.

"Hey, hey," an unrecognizable, deep voice cut his pleas short from somewhere to my left. I turned into the direction I believed it to have come from quickly after I heard it, and then saw a tall boy with a stubby brown beard and fair complexion who goes by the name of Jason Ganderfield emerge from the crowd. A tall boy with facial hair and light skin whom, I should add, was known to use the school weight room more days of the week than any other individual in Central Tacket County High School's eleventh grade class... including Sundays.

I watched him push past a few people's sides and come forth, then, before raising his hands in front of his chest, palms outward, in Skyler's direction.

"*Skyler*, bud, is that your name?" he questioned of him.

I shifted my gaze from Jason to Skyler as he answered.

"Y-Yeah," he stuttered out, his voice suddenly much softer in nature than before, as he lowered his hands, still clutching the black box, to his waistline.

I looked back at Jason as he brought his own hands onto his hips.

"Well, *Skyler*," he began, his eyes not moving from his figure. "I don't think Emma's interested right now..."

I studied him as he studied Skyler for a moment longer, noticing the change in background music from Kellie Pickler to Kanye West.

We can't forget this is Fiona Pindell's party, though, can we?

"Are you, Emma?" Jason continued, now actually glancing into my direction.

"I, uh," I started to respond.

But, of course, *again*, before I could complete my thought, Skyler interrupted.

"I'm sorry, Emma," he said. "But can we talk... alone... for a minute?"

"You sure that's a good idea, buddy?" Jason jumped to spit out at him.

"I, um," I tried to speak once again, though this time I seemed to catch the attention of both boys, seeing how they each looked directly at me and held back from speaking over me anymore. "Yeah, sure."

"You *sure*, Emma?" Jason asked me.

I looked at just him for a second, and then took a step toward Skyler.

"Yeah, it's fine," I stated.

I continued to step past Skyler's side and into the direction of the kitchen doorway behind him.

"Come on," I grumbled, now walking back into the hallway outside. I then turned to the right and proceeded toward the back door, of which led *actually* outside. Once there, I creaked it open, paused for Skyler's footsteps to reach my backside, and then stepped outside, releasing the door to his grip as I did so.

"Okay..." I mumbled, now stepping onto the dimly lit wooden deck, nothing but miles of dark sky visible above.

And then it occurred to me that Skyler (or anyone else, actually) could easily murder me in the sketchy darkness and hide my body to decompose underneath the deck until the stench of it became too great for Fiona to handle and thus make her decide to curiously search for the source of the smell and discover my partial remains with worms festering in my eyeballs and ants crawling all over my crotch...

But, then again, if I were going to get murdered, I'd rather it have been in the vacant darkness than in front of the whole mob of people that currently infested Fiona Pindell's kitchen.

"Now... *what?*" I went on to question, crossing my arms and turning around to hesitantly face Skyler as I pushed myself out of my thoughts.

"Emma..." he began, stepping away from the door after closing it to reveal the side of his face underneath one of the lights attached to the siding of the house. "You never *answered* me..."

"*Answered?*" I shot back, tilting my head to one side.

"My... My proposal..." he went on.

I instantly raised my eyebrows.

"Um, pretty sure I did, actually," I claimed.

"But just..." Skyler continued, lowering his eyes to the ground and his hands to his sides, that one stupid black box still in one of them. "Just say it, Emma. You don't love me."

I studied what I could see of his facial expression through the blackness and waited for his eyes to flicker back up at me before responding to him, but, when they didn't, I went on anyway.

"Skyler, um..." I began, allowing my voice to turn much softer than it previously had sounded. "You're a... a really nice guy, *really*, but... no, sorry, I don't love you." I paused as I watched him finally glance up at me, and then decided to go on further. "I mean, yes, okay, I might have used to have a *tiny* crush on you... in, like, third grade, but then you moved away and, you know, things change and people grow up and everything. So... no, I do not *love* you, but I still... *like* you, as in, like, a person and all. I mean, I don't *hate* you. I don't really hate anyone."

So, there's my pageant queen speech of the year. *WWMCD?*, right?

"Wow, Emma," Skyler began to reply, his voice suddenly full of awe toward me.

"You... You're so nice... even if you... you don't..."

His voice quickly trailed away, so I picked up the conversation for him.

"Well, you know what they say about me," I commented.

Skyler paused.

"*What?*" he questioned, his voice still soft and low.

I opened my mouth to reply, but paused, myself, for a moment.

"Well, I... I don't know, actually; I thought maybe you did."

Skyler abruptly released one of his, I guess, *signature* hardy laughs and took a few steps toward me, one hand reaching out to my shoulder.

"Yeah, that's," I went on, though I didn't really mean to, as he grabbed my shoulder and leaned over a little in his fit. "That's how I get information out of people." I watched him straighten his back, still giggling, and then looked down at my feet momentarily.

"My common investigative move..." I mumbled, now feeling slight discomfort from his continuative laughing assault.

"Oh, I love you, Emma," I heard him say.

As soon as I raised my head back to his direction, though, something... quite definitely unexpected occurred.

I widened my eyes as he leaned his face right directly toward mine and forced his slightly moistened lips right smack against mine.

Oh, and then I felt something even more wet push its way in between them and whip itself at the crease of my mouth.

Within a split second, I threw both of my hands against each of his shoulders and thrust his body away from mine.

"Ugh!" I screamed out, now slapping my hands against the sides of my head as he stumbled backward.

"You... You..." I shakily spoke as I hit my hands back to my thighs. "You... *insane, delusional asshole!*" I leaned my body slightly aback as I yelled at him. "You know what!"

I watched him collect himself to a sturdy stand once more, and then continued.

"I thought you," I raised one finger toward him. "You were a nice guy that was just a little shot in the head, you know?" I threw my hands out to my sides, and then slapped them onto my thighs once again. "But now, *now* I know you're *really* crazy." I slid my hands up to my hips. "And you know what else? I was lying. I'm not really that nice. I really do hate a lot of people, and guess what? Now you get to be one of 'em!"

I charged for the door straight ahead, but stopped and turned back to him one step away from it.

"So," I started, raising a finger at him yet again. "Goodbye, goodnight, and don't talk to me ever again!"

I spun around, threw the door to the house open in front of me, and then rushed through it, not even stopping to close it once through.

"Stella!" I shouted, stomping my way back to the kitchen ahead and on the left.

Once I approached it and glanced past its doorframe, though, I noticed that every individual in the room was huddled around the windows facing the deck outside, though,

as soon as I yelled Stella's name once more, every single one of them snapped toward me and began to applaud and whistle.

"Amen, Emma!" I heard one girl yell, though I had no idea who it was.

"Damn, girl!" another boy's voice shouted.

I relaxed my expression as I quickly scanned the room of cheering classmates.

And then I smiled... just a bit.

"Oh, well," I began, shifting my weight to one hip as I raised my hands out to my sides. "It was nothing, really."

The applause slowed to a gradual stop as Stella revealed herself from the crowd and stepped toward me.

"Wow, Emma," she started, her voice quieter than the others', which were now turning to each other for small chatter. "That was... really interesting."

She nodded and noticeably forged a smile.

"Well, don't be too impressed, Stella," I stated, taking note of her likely faked enthusiasm.

"Oh, but I-" Stella immediately stuttered back, suddenly reaching out to gently and a little awkwardly touch my shoulder. "I really *am*, Emma."

I studied her eerie smile a moment longer, and then shrugged her hand off.

"Sure..." I mumbled, now glancing behind her back.

And, just then, I spotted Fiona as she approached the two of us.

"Poor guy is just sitting alone out there now..." she commented, stopping to stand directly by my side. Once she gazed into my direction and caught a lock on my eye contact, though, she instantaneously blurted out a correction to her statement. "I mean- not *poor guy*... but, um, like, just *that* guy!"

I faked a smile of my own toward her, and then spoke.

"Yeah, I know, Fiona..." I glanced from her to Stella, and then back to her again.

"Um, I think we should probably go now..."

I looked back at Stella as she spoke up.

"But, Emma, we didn't-"

"Oh, yes, we didn't *thank* Fiona, did we?" I butted in, glancing back to Fiona. "Thank you, Fiona, for the..." I raised my hands to gesture around her kitchen.

"*Wonderful* party... amazing, truly, and, um..." I paused to look around some more. "The absolutely *delicious* punch!" I lit up my face purposefully as I gained eye contact with Fiona once more. "Who made it, by the way? Was it a... an old family recipe or something?"

"Jared made it, actually," she informed me.

I nodded slowly at her.

"Oh, *really*?" I questioned.

No wonder.

Fiona nodded back at me, and then I proceeded speaking.

"Well, make sure he does it again next time!" I exclaimed.

Fiona nodded, again, and let out a tiny laugh.

"Oh, I will," she said. "He's always so nice and... helpful to me, really."

I pursed my lips for a second and probably lost my enthused expression in the process.

"Uh huh..." I eventually muttered out. "Well, um, like I said, we got to go, so... bye!"

I reached one hand down to grab Stella's wrist, and then turned toward the doorway behind me.

"Bye guys," Fiona parted, making a waving gesture at the two of us. "Thanks for coming!"

"Uh huh!" I responded, now stepping underneath the kitchen doorframe, pulling Stella's arm behind myself.

"Thanks for having us, Fiona," I heard Stella nicely speak out, right before I yanked her into the hallway behind me. I glanced over at her and let go of her wrist, then, as we both began to make our way to the front door of the house.

"Thanks for coming with me, I guess, Emma," she said to me, right as I approached the far-off door and grasped its handle. "Even if you didn't let me ask anyone about anything about those dick pics."

"Oh, it's no problem," I responded, twisting to look at her as I pushed opened the door out in front of us both. "I actually think I'd rather put the dick pics behind us, now, though, okay?" I turned away to step outside, holding the door open for Stella to follow after me. "And, even with the whole pop-proposal thing I somehow got involved in, it wasn't *too* terrible of a party..." I released my grip on the door's edge as I saw Stella step up to my side. "And, anyway, it could maybe make for a great story someday."

*Wink wink.*

"Yeah, sorry about that..." Stella said, crossing her arms tightly to block out the cold as we both stepped along the lit sidewalk leading to Fiona's driveway on the near left. "But, I think you *were* a little hard on him..."

I rolled my eyes from the pavement under my feet to the rows of rusty cars lining the sides of the driveway ahead, and then responded.

"Oh, shut up, Stella."

## Kidnapée

"Stella, stop!" I screeched out. "*Stop!*"

I reached out, seized her by her shoulders, and shook her body back and forth in front of me. I watched her as she finally ceased her frantic screaming and glared her red, tear-stained eyeballs right into mine, which were probably just about as blackened with concern as hers.

"*But,*" Stella began to whine at me. "What do we *do*?"

Okay, now I should probably slow myself down and catch you up with what the hell is actually going on.

First, since my outing with Stella Anderson at Fiona Pindell's house party last weekend went so well, Stella *proposed* that we try another excursion one-on-one, just the two of us. I didn't want to. But she insisted... incessantly.

So, when the next Friday evening came around, Stella decided to pick me up in her nice little "retro" yellow slug-bug (retro to Stella apparently means anything older than a mere eight years of age), drove the two of us to this tiny and usually deserted park area next to Green Lake (though, ironically, its water is actually much more yellow in tint and is notoriously known by every other county around for having the highest number of tampons removed from it every spring, supposedly the highest number in the state... what the actual count last spring was, I'm not sure, but rumor has it the year before that a record high of 566 tampons were removed from the water), and, since it was proving to be such a surprisingly warm day for early March (I mean, 50 degrees Fahrenheit!), we got some ice cream blizzards from the local DQ and decided to take a stroll alongside the infamous lake.

And then the conversation went something like this:

"*Oh, Emma, this is so nice! Why didn't we ever do anything together before the... you know.*" (-Stella.)

"*Wow, Stella, I don't know...*" (-Me, slightly sarcastically, though I don't think Stella ever picked up on the tone in my voice.) "*Maybe because we've pretty much hated and avoided each other's company for about ten years or so now.*"

Stella: "*Oh, no, Emma, I never hated you!*" (I recall I looked the opposite direction of her to roll my eyes and shove a dripping glob of fudge-flavored heaven into my mouth before she went on.) "*I don't hate anybody...*"

Me, butting in quietly before she continued even further: "*Yeah, I've heard that one before.*"

Stella, ignoring my remark: "*I mean, yeah, we might have had our differences and everything in the past... but we're older and smarter now, right?*"

"*Sure.*" (-Me.)

Stella: "*Oh, well, it's all behind us now... and so is the last few of our... 'incidences', right? I mean... school and the party and everything...*"

Me, after devouring the final remnants of my chocolate ice cream: "*Yeah... and, I don't know about you, but I'm really done with boys right about now.*"

And then, of course, we both comfortably laughed, right before... well, okay, here's what happened.

First, there was a scream. Not from either of us, *no*... from some lady (from what it sounded like, though I guess it could also have been mistaken for a duck call or

something of that nature) behind both of us. So, naturally, we both spun around to see what was up, right? And then... *bam*.

This very elderly woman with typical short gray hair curled via, probably, hot rollers, a baggy blue and white striped sweater that hung down to her wrinkly old knees, which were not clothes by pants of any kind, and a pair of fuzzy bunny slippers which seemed to once actually be white but had become caked with dirt from... well, probably wearing them outside, came charging at the two of us.

And then she *pounced* onto Stella and physically *knocked* her down to the dirt path beneath our feet. And Stella screamed out, and then I screamed out, and then the lady emitted another one of the duck call sounds.

So, after that, I thought *WWMCD?*, right? And so then I threw my (thankfully already) finished ice cream cup down and jumped onto this crazy old lady's back. And I yelled out, "Get off her!" and reached around to slap my hands onto the woman's saggy face, but then she brought her elbow backward and stabbed me directly in the side of the throat with it. And, Oh God, that really hurt... so then I let go of her and slid off her back to land onto my own on the ground beside her.

And then I looked over at Stella, who was now suddenly extremely quiet, and realized that she was actually *unconscious*. So, of course, I screamed out in terror as the old woman stepped back from her, and then brought myself back to my feet as she turned to me. And then I saw her come at me with this gross, dripping wet yellow cloth that, at first, I thought she just dunked in the tampon water, but then thought twice about it when I realized she was aiming to shove it right at my mouth.

Before she could do that, though, I somehow snatched it away, and then I chucked it toward the lake, though it only landed a few feet away from where we were.

"Fetch," I remember mumbling to her as she made a weird grumbling sound and turned to run toward where it rested by the lakeside. And then, as she rushed away from me, I turned and squatted down beside Stella, who was still unresponsive, face-up atop the earth.

And I yelled at her to wake up so we could go and I recall slapping the sides of her cheeks a bit, but then I felt that stupid lady jump onto *my* back.

"Get off, crazy bitch!" I remember shouting the most vividly out of everything as I attempted to shake her off of me.

But, of course, I couldn't get rid of her, and then, before you know it, that damn nasty cloth was smothering my nose and mouth.

And then... well, I guess whatever it was doused with knocked me out, just like it apparently did to Stella, and then I woke up in this old, smelly basement to Stella's ceaseless screaming.

So, back to where we previously were...

"*But*," Stella whined. "What do we *do*?"

I kept my hands on her shoulders and studied her face full of fear for a long, *long* second.

"Well, that... that's a good question," I mumbled out.

I slid my hands back to myself as Stella began to let out a loud, whimper-y cry.

"Oh boy..." I continued to whisper, now taking a second to glance around at my surrounding more in-depth than I had when I first awoke.

I took note of the super sketchy wooden staircase against the far wall on my right, the completely cement paneling behind it as well as an exact replica of the concrete covering every other wall in the approximately 15 by 25 square foot room, the white but considerably dusty and dirt covered refrigerator standing against the wall behind Stella's back, the two slits of shallow windows, though both too close to the ceiling and too out of reach to look out of, high up on the wall to my left, the two large cardboard boxes sitting next to one another, each closed up for the moment, and the stack of about seven or eight spiderweb encrusted buckets beside them all in front of the wall behind my own back.

"Lord..." I muttered as I took my observations on every object and detail of the partially empty room.

"E-E-E-Emma," Stella stuttered out through her tears. I gazed back at her as she shook her head and wiped a few of them away with the sleeve of her thin blue sweatshirt. "I-I-I-I-I d-d-don't w-w-wanna d-d-d-die!"

"Stella," I started, again, now grabbing firmly at her shoulders once more and piercing my gaze right into hers. "We are not going to d—"

Before I could finish my affirmative statement, however, a loud creak echoed throughout the room and the 'i' sound that I intended to form turned into a much sharper 'AH' one. Stella let out a very similar scream, also, and grabbed my hands away from her arms as we both snapped our heads into the direction of the wooden stairs across the room.

I allowed my scream to fade away when I saw that the noise was actually the sound of that ridiculously abrasive old woman entering the room, though she both shut and locked the door behind herself to, I suppose, deter our thoughts of escaping soon after I caught gaze of her.

Stella's scream turned even more slowly than mine into her new signature whiny cry as she squeezed my hands more tightly in front of her chest and took a step backward, forcing me to move alongside her.

I stared silently at the woman as she began making her way ever-so-sluggishly down the staircase and, once she was about two steps from the floor, she spoke out to us in an eerily squeaky voice.

"How are my kiddies today?" her voice echoed out, her tone very unnecessarily enthusiastic.

Stella continued to cry while I watched the woman both slide the key she used to lock the door into the front of her (surprisingly existent and likely not large enough) bra and finally make it to the ground.

"We..." I began to reply, feeling Stella's clutch tighten even more than it already was on me. "We've been better..."

"Oh, look at my girls..." the woman went on, ignoring my statement as she stepped toward the two of us. "You just look so *cute* today!"

She smiled through her nasty wrinkles, swerved to the right, and shuffled in the direction of the boxes and buckets at the back of the room.

"You girls ready to have some fun?" she asked, again, very much too enthused for her own good.

"No, actually," I responded. "I think we're good..."



Stella let out a stronger cry, threw my hands down, and flung her arms around me, now bringing me into a closely uncomfortable hug.

I kept my eyes on the old woman, though, and studied her backside as she bent over and began to open one of the cardboard boxes on the floor ahead.

"Okay, Stella," I then whispered, turning my face to bring my mouth up to her ear. "Here's what we're gonna do... I'll tackle her down, and you get the key from her bra."

Stella continued to whine as the woman began to rummage through whatever hard objects resided in that one box.

"Okay?" I went on mumbling, now flickering my eyes toward Stella and giving an attempt at pushing myself away from her clutches, though she hurriedly pulled me back in and looked at me with tearstained cheeks.

"E-E-E-Emma," she stuttered out, not actually very quietly at *all*. "I-I-I'm s-s-s-s-sc-sc-sc-scared!"

I narrowed my eyebrows at her and let out a soft hushing sound; however, it apparently wasn't soothing enough for Stella's taste, because she proceeded to scream out a sob and slowly lower herself to her knees, though, luckily enough for me, she slid her hands away from my body in the process.

"Stella!" I loud-whispered, now stepping back a bit to look down at her as she literally sank into a puddle of sorrow on the cold, concrete ground.

"Oh, girls, look at all these pretty toys I bought for you!" the demented woman shouted out, forcing me to spin around and hand my attention back to her as she suddenly heaved the box up to her waist, tilted it to its side, and dumped its complete contents onto the ground by her feet. I quickly scanned the variety of plastic children's toys that had once been held captive in the container as they each fell the floor with a loud *clack* or *thrum*, though I only took note of three decapitated, naked babydolls, a cracked blue frisbee seeming to be covered in webs once spun by spiders of whom were likely to be deceased as of probably ten years ago, and one red rubber duck, though red seemed *not* to be its original body color... all before I threw my gaze back at the old woman.

I watched her turn her back to me and gently place the cardboard box back beside the other, untouched one.

Now, I then had two options to pick from... One, I could have slinked down to the cold dirty hard floor next to Stella and cry and scream and whine and kick until the crazy old woman put me out of my misery... or, choice number two, which I'm sure you all know me well enough by now to know what that certain option entailed and how very likely I was to choose it.

So, yes, I picked option number two.

Immediately, I gathered up all my energy and used it to shoot myself directly in the woman's direction. I scampered up to her back, then, and let out a soft grunt as I threw myself on top of it.

"*Oh!*" she, eerily innocently, shouted out as I knocked her down to the ground below.

"Let us out of here!" I screeched, now scurrying to sit myself on top of her backside, one leg on each side of her waist.

"*Erica*, please, stop!" the woman yelled.

I scrunched up my nose for the quickest moment at the back of her head.

"I'm not Erica..." I mumbled, probably too softly for her to hear.

Just then, though, she slapped her hands down on the concrete underneath herself and thrust her back upward, catching me a little off guard and tossing me onto *my* back behind her.

"Bad girl!" she screamed, now pulling herself up to her feet.

I remained silent, then, as I hurried up to a stand as well behind her. She spun around at the same moment, and then I reached up to grab both of her wrists as she raised them in front of her chest.

"Give me the key!" I shouted.

"Why don't you love me, Erica!" the woman screamed back, her face turning to heavy emotion.

"Just give me the key!" I reiterated.

Right then, she snapped her arms down with a surprisingly great amount of force, making me release them promptly. Afterward, she threw one hand back, and then slapped it harshly across my left cheek.

"Ow!" I spat out, throwing my hands up to my face as my head whipped to the side.

"Bad girl, Erica!" the woman screamed, now suddenly grabbing my left shoulder and pushing it forcibly backward.

"Stop!" I yelled, now stumbling to the side as an effect from her force.

"Bad, *bad* girl!" she repeated.

I turned back to her once I had caught my balance from falling, and then witnessed her rush into the direction of the staircase.

"No!" I shouted, now sprinting right after her. I ran up to her backside, again, and then threw my arms around her waist. "You're not going anywhere!"

"Bad, Erica, bad!" the woman continued to hiss.

"Give me the key!" I repeated.

I then attempted to pull her backward a few steps, but, as I did, she grabbed my hands and began to pry them away from her smelly old sweater.

"Stop!" I screamed out as she successfully pulled my clutch off of herself.

And, before I could do much of anything about it, she pulled my left hand up to her face, and then I felt a deep, sharp sting become suddenly delivered to the side of it.

"Ah-" I sputtered out in pain as she slowly turned around in front of me to show *her* teeth sunken into *my* hand.

I widened my eyes for a spilt second before she released her bite and smashed her hands into my shoulders, promptly pushing me aback. Unlike the last time she attempted to throw me down, though, she was actually successful.

I threw my hands behind myself as I came crashing down to the cement, my buttocks catching the grunt of my fall.

I watched the woman run around the edge of the stairs, and then began to stand myself up once more

"Ow, ow, ow," I grumbled as I did so. After I was up, though, I tossed myself forward, and then whipped myself around the bottom of the staircase.

"Stop!" I shouted, now trotting my way rushingly up the steps, my head kept down to focus on the stairs. "Don't you dare leave!"

I heard a loud *bang* at the top, and then looked up as I stepped to see the woman fly through the open doorframe, slamming the door shut behind. As I looked, then, I

stumbled a little bit on my feet, and in turn glanced downward once more. I continued to rush up to the top, though, and turned toward the closed wooden door once I got there.

I threw my hands out to the doorknob and began frantically twisting it both left and right, though it was locked and didn't budge near enough to effectively open the exit-way.

"Let us *out!*" I screeched, now banging my hands flat against the center of the closed portal. "Get back here!" I slammed my hands into the door a few more times, and then returned them to jiggle the immovable handle. "*Ah!*"

I screeched and screamed another minute or so, and then slapped the door one final time before falling to silence.

Well... it *would* have been silence if it weren't for Stella's incorrigible, thundering whimpers echoing out from across the room.

I brought my hands up to my hips, pursed my lips at the door for another moment, and then peeked my head over my shoulder to see Stella sitting on the floor, her back to the wall, and her forehead to her knees in the exact same place she had been when I last left her to unsuccessfully attack the mentally unstable ninety year old woman holding us hostage.

I looked her over a moment, then turned to the right, trailed down the staircase, and stepped my way over to her side.

"Stella, it's..." I began to push out as I slammed my back against the wall behind her and slide my body down to sit next to her left side. "It's... gonna be alright."

I stretched my right arm out to wrap around her upper back.

"B-B-But," Stella stuttered back, now raising her head from her legs. "W-W-We're g-g-gonna..." She proceeded to crane her neck to face me and I nearly screeched out in horror at the amount of mascara and eyeliner smeared all over her countenance. I mean, it was *everywhere*... her cheeks, her lips, her forehead, up her nose, and even *on* her eyeballs; however that happens, I haven't got a clue, but it did.

"D-D-D-D-D-D-D-" Stella endlessly mumbled, though I took the liberty of cutting her short before she could utter that damn word that I knew was coming.

"Stella," I slid my arm inward from her backside and grabbed at her shoulder.

"We're *not* going to *die!*"

She whimpered back at me a bit.

"H-H-How d-d-do y-you kn-know t-t-t-t-t-"

"Because," I spat out, again, before she could finish her whining. "I... I'm *psychic*, Stella, and I had a *vision*..." I squinted my eyes at her and sluggishly nodded. "I saw us both... on a pontoon... on Lake Michigan... drinking margaritas... and-"

This time, Stella courageously stopped me short.

"I-I... I h-hate b-boats, *Emma!*"

I raised a brow at the sound of her first non-stuttered word this entire time.

"A-And t-that's... n... n-not f-funny, Emma!" she went on, again pronouncing only *my* name with full comprehension. "I-I kn-know y-you're n-not a-a... ps-*psychic!*"

I stared at her finally drying tears for a moment while I thought of a reply to give back to her.

"Only a psychic would know that," I commented.

I watched her roll her eyes and look away.

"Emma," she began, her voice suddenly so much more calm and stable and peaceful and understandable and tranquil. She glanced back at me as she finished her sentence. "Stop being such a whore-house in the mouth."

I raised my brows at her.

"Well," I responded, unable to hold back a slight smirk. "Only if you stop bringing out the bitch-beef from your teeth."

Finally, Stella flashed a genuine smile at me.

"Oh, Emma," she mumbled, glancing forward and throwing her head back to rest against the wall behind our backs. "Why... *Why* weren't we friends before now?"

I leaned my back back as well.

"You don't remember?" I questioned, softly.

"No, I..." Stella began to reply, exchanging a quick glance with me. "... I know we had our differences and... *stuff*, but... like, *why*?"

I kept my eyes on her and narrowed my eyebrows, though she was now looking forward once again.

"You told everyone I was a drug addicted whore, Stella," I reminded her.

Stella shot me a look with her mouth half open.

"I did *not*!" she spat.

I crossed both my arms and my legs and rolled my eyes away from her.

"*When*?" she decided to ask.

"Middle school," I jumped to answer. "Seventh grade. Math class on a late fall day's afternoon, actually, to be precise. At least... that was the *first* time."

I glanced back over at her as she squinted at me with some sort of unnecessary skepticism.

"What did I... *say*?" she inquired.

I searched her face for a second, opened my mouth to speak, but then trickled my eyes to the floor and thought a moment longer before actually saying anything.

"Actually," I began. "It doesn't really matter, now."

I pushed a clump of my (likely very greasy and dirty) umber-colored hair behind one ear and turned away from Stella for a short moment, specifically until she captured my attention by talking once more.

"No," she said. "Tell me."

I looked over at her anticipating physique and paused.

"Well," I started, a short sigh following soon after. "To be exact... I recall you asked me whether or not I was planning on *smoking a joint with my pimp daddy after school* that evening."

Stella raised one hand over her mouth and let out a strong giggle.

I, however, maintained my composure and stared blankly back at her.

"Wait, wait," she laughed out, now lowering her palm. "*I* said that? No, Emma, I don't think that was *me*..."

"Um," I bumbled out. "But, it *was*, actually."

She shook her head.

"I don't think so," she stated. "I don't remember it; how do *you* remember that like that?"

"Well, Stella," I answered, glancing down to my hands as I placed them atop my knees. "It was a pretty memorable and... *truly* touching thing to be told at twelve years

old, so..." I gazed back up at her. "I also kind of have the memory of a... an elephant on stimulants and black market steroids, so..." I forged a smile. "There's that."

Stella smiled back, also probably one created by force, and then placed a hand on my shoulder nearest her.

"Oh, Emma..." she trailed off, resting her eyesight on her hand for a second. "You're not a whore." She looked back up at me, smiled, again, and shook her head slightly. "And... it takes one to know one, right? And... well, we both know *I'm* not a whore!"

Stella erupted in an almost scarily strained fit of laughter, though it was also a tad funny to watch in itself.

"Oh, wow," I forced out with another smile. "That... That's a good one, Stella, thank you."

"But, I..." she calmed down and relaxed her facial muscles. "I guess..." She stopped to look down at the floor between us. "There could be a... *slight* chance that... *maybe*... I *could have* said something... just a *little bit* like... like, mean or something to... to you."

"It's okay, Stella..." I partially-mumbled back to her as she carefully glanced back up at me. "You don't have to be a con-artist about it... I know all the stuff you said about me." I studied her as she silently bit her lip and flickered her mascara-melded eyelids back downward. "But, I know I probably said a lot of... things about you, too." I paused and waited for her to look back up, but she didn't right away. "I mean, I... I can't really think of any off the top of my head... or at *all*, actually, but..." I looked her over once more, and then decided to reach my hands out to gently touch hers upon her lap, forcing her to finally return her attention to my expression. "Seriously, Stella, it's all okay now. I forgive you."

Stella took a deep breath.

"Yeah, I'm..." she almost inaudibly whispered. "I'm sorry, Emma..."

She looked down at her lap as I slide my hands away from hers.

"But," she went on, raising her voice to an almost more normal level of volume. "You could probably apologize, too, you know..." She gazed back at me and raised her brows. "For that time you and your stupid brothers egged my dad's old Lamborghini."

I squinted at her and tilted my head to one side.

"Um, Stella, sorry, but," I started. "A few things on that... first, I don't have any brothers, second, I've never egged anyone's car or house or... *any* possessions in my lifetime, and third... your dad has a *Lamborghini*?"

Stella rolled her eyes away.

"He *had* a Lamborghini, until it got egged..." she claimed, and then crossed her arms.

I continued to squint at her.

"But couldn't he just... clean the eggs off?" I asked.

Stella literally dropped her jaw and turned to back to me.

"It was a *Lamborghini*, Emma!" she suddenly shouted.

I jumped under my skin a bit at her abruptly loud statement, and then tried to relax my shoulders and continue the conversation.

"Well, okay, Stella, but... it wasn't me, *I swear*."

Stella narrowed her eyebrows at me, and then gradually guided her eyes toward the staircase on the far wall.

"Then it was that one bitch..." she, after a moment or two of silence, muttered under her breath.

I gave Stella a once over before piping up.

"Um... *what?*"

She snapped her head back to me.

"If it wasn't you, then it was *that one bitch...*" she threw one hand up to rub over one eyebrow. "Ugh, what's her name?"

"Wow, Stella, really wish I knew," I commented as she lost herself in thought, or something of the like.

Stella turned her head forward and threw her palms up to her forehead.

"She's with a new guy, like, every five minutes... and even her boyfriend doesn't care... his name is, like... *Andy*, or something, and... her name starts with a... a *P*, or maybe an *M*..." she hinted out-loud.

I stared at Stella as she thought for another second... and then another... and then a few more... until it hit *me*.

I mean, come on, she was literally quizzing my one area of expertise... gossip, secrets, and the deepest darkest reaches of every living soul that isn't mine.

Every soul that isn't mine attending Central Talket County High School, that is.

I threw my hands down to smack the floor beside my thighs.

"*Miranda Lively!*" I yelled.

"Thank you!" Stella shouted back, throwing her hands completely outstretched on either side of herself, one of her hands coming as close as, probably, .03 inches from slapping the side of cheek bone as she did so. I looked the back of her hand over, then, as it resided directly in front of my face, greatly obscuring my vision of anything else in the room, Stella herself included, for just a second or two.

"You're welcome..." I mumbled out.

Stella gradually lowered her arms to her sides and leaned her head back a bit.

"Ugh, she's so annoying..." she declared. "I mean..." she halted to roll her gaze to me. "I can't say that I actually *hate* anybody, Emma, but... that girl... I do *kind of* hate."

I nodded at her before she rolled her neck, again, and continued.

"I mean, I know I said it takes one to know one... but you don't have to be a super slut to know that *she* takes the top title in school whore."

And then I did something I had never executed before in my entire seventeen year life.

I agreed with Stella Anderson.

"She *is*," I started as Stella straightened her neck and glanced over at me yet again. "And she... she's like... the first slice in the loaf of bread, because... everyone just *has* to touch her, but nobody really *wants* her."

Stella let out a good giggle, as did I, for about forty-five seconds or so. After that, the laughter died down, and Stella looked down at her feet.

"But, if we get out of here," I began, though I quickly stopped to rethink my wording before continuing. "*When* we get out of here... we'll get her back, Stella, we *will*."

She turned back to me and narrowed her brows.

"For *what*, though?" she asked.

I gave her a blank stare momentarily.

"For... *egging your dad's car*," I lowered my voice to respond.

"Oh, yeah," Stella shot out, whipping her head to the other side once more.

I looked the back of her stick straight, platinum blonde hair over for a long, silent moment, before she turned back to me and piped up once more.

"Um, Emma," she began, her tone almost even lower than a whisper. "I... I have to... pee..."

I raised an eyebrow at her.

"Do you have to..." I tilted my head to the side a bit. "Right *now*?"

"Yeah..." she answered, looking down yet again. "I've had to for a... a while now, and it... it kind of hurts, now..."

I continued to stare at the side of her expression for a moment or two, and then took a quiet but deep breath.

"Okay," I exhaled, and then placed my palms against the floor and pushed myself up to my feet. Once that was accomplished, I turned toward the stairs, walked both over to and up them, and then stopped in front of the bolted door at the very end of them.

I pursed my lips for a second, and then slapped my hands against the center of it.

"Hey!" I shouted out. "One of us... has to use the bathroom!"

I pounded my palms into the barrier again... and then again... and then a few more times.

"Hey! We need to use the bathroom! Hello!" I continued to yell.

I paused to listen for any traces of any possible movements from the other side, but, of course, there were none.

"Hey! Bathroom! Hey!" I screeched, now banging my fists against the door a hefty amount of times. "*Hey!*"

I continued the cycle of screaming and pounding another minute or so before slowing down to a stop. I listened, again, for any sounds beyond the doorway... but, *you guessed it*, there was not a single one to be heard.

I slid my hands down to my sides and sluggishly turned around to look at Stella from over the railing.

"I don't think she's..." I began to say, though Stella apparently wanted to jump in to finish my words for me.

"S-She's n-n-not c-c-c-c-coming!" she cried out, afterward throwing her head into her knees, still sitting in the same spot as before.

"Oh, boy," I mumbled as I watched her softly sob for a second.

I put my hands on my hips the next moment, but then sighed and turned to make my way back down the steps the one after that.

"Stella..." I muttered while I crossed the last few of the stairs, though I knew she could neither hear my voice nor probably process any words in that moment anyway. "Stella, it's okay..."

I proceeded up to her side, and then crouched down on my knees.

"Stella..." I repeated, and, after that, she actually glanced up at me.

"N-N-No, I... I r-really have to p-p-pee!" she screeched into my face.

Before I could say anything to her in response, she closed her eyes and cried out yet again.

"Are you-" I started anyway, though I bit my lip and stopped myself before I could add 'sure' because... well, I impulsively decided to hold back from making her any more upset than she already was; I really didn't want to see the next level of emotion she

could bring to the table since I really didn't know at that time how much time I was actually going to be locked beside her and only her in that stinky old cellar.

Instead, I trailed my eyes upward and very luckily caught gaze of some of the objects across the room.

"Oh!" I exclaimed as I popped up to my feet and hurried over to the stack of green and yellow, dirt-caked buckets. I reached down, then, and snatched up the top one, though I paused for a moment afterward as I observed a cloud of dust fall off of its bottom, now that it was detached from the others.

I wrinkled my nose for the shortest second, then turned back to Stella and wiped my disgusted look away.

"Here, go in this," I claimed, now noticing she had temporarily withheld her sobs just enough to partially-attentively look back at me.

She dropped her eyes onto the bucket that I held as far outstretched from my body as physically possible with just my fingertips, and then replied to me.

"Emma, I... I can't..." she paused to throw her gaze back up to my face. "I can't pee in a *bucket!*"

She threw her hands up to her cheeks, her forehead down to her elevated knees, and let out a loud sound full of clear frustration.

"*Ugh!*"

I remained in place and awaited her cries to start up once again, but when they didn't, I took the liberty of asserting her previous statement.

"Well... why not?" I asked.

She tossed her head over at me and squinted her eyes as I threw my one free hand out from my side, palm-up.

"It... It's *dirty!*" she shouted.

"You can hover!" I argued back.

"It could fall over!" she yelled.

"I'll hold it for you!"

"Ew!" Stella screeched, now crossing her arms and throwing her head toward the opposite side of the room.

I froze for a second, and then dropped the bucket down to the ground by my feet, the loud bang it gave off catching Stella's attention back quite effectively before I continued my rationalization.

"Look, Stella, it's either *this...*" I began, stopping to look down at and gesture to the (at one time) forest green pale. "A decently large container that can..." I looked up and continued to gesture toward the wall on my far right. "Be stored in the corner of the room..." Finally, I regained eye contact with Stella herself. "Or, get a UTI from holding your urine for too long... and those aren't real pleasant." I paused. "Or, so I've been told."

Stella looked me over.

"I... I just can't go in that thing, okay?" she declared. "A-And... what if... if I did...and... that lady came back while I... was going?"

"Well," I responded, leaning onto one hip. "I... I'll take care of her, then. But... if she does, you might have to stop real fast if we get the chance to... you know, get the hell out."

Stella guided her eyes to her feet.



"I... I-I don't know..." she muttered out.

I stared at the side of her face for a long, quiet moment.

"Do you want me want me to go first?" I piped up to ask.

"N... N..." Stella began back, gradually turning her gaze onto me. "N... Well... If you... *have* to go, you... you *can*..."

She shrugged.

"Yeah?" I said, sliding my hands up to my hips. "Well, I've been holding this one in a while, so..." I twisted to the bucket on the floor by my cheap, unbranded lavender colored sneakers. "So... yeah..."

(Oh, and by unbranded shoes I really mean the hand-me-down shoes I got from one of my long-distance cousins last summer that are so old and worn that whatever off-brand name once engraved on their soles has become rubbed into non-existence with time.)

I stared into the heart of the dusty bucket, observing the mess of crusted cob webs encased within it and the crumbling rust rim around the top of it.

"Um..." I began. "You know, maybe a... a different bucket could be a bit more suitable for this... job."

I glanced up, stepped over to the side of the remaining buckets, and replaced the one I held with the next in line: a dark yellow, slightly less crusted-over pale.

"Oh, look," I commented, turning to back to Stella. "This one's already yellow... how convenient."

I pushed the smallest smile at her, but she only glared back at me with her dark, makeup-coagulated eyeballs.

"Okay, well," I went on, after a moment, now dropping the bucket on the floor in front of my feet.

I stared, silent and still, at the oversized container for a long moment.

"Just *go*, Emma!" Stella shouted, pulling me out of my unmoving trance.

I threw my head back up at her as she slapped her hands over her face and let out a half-whimper half-scream through her palms.

"Okay, okay," I said back, though I wasn't sure she could actually hear me (or anything else, for that matter) past her grumbling and moaning sounds.

I looked back down at the bucket, noticed that there was a very decently sized hairy black spider standing still in the bottom of it, closed my eyes for a second, reopened them the next, and then stepped around the side of the pale. After that, I reached down and grabbed at the sides of my thick (and very comfortably insulated with fleece) black leggings, paused a moment longer, and then... pulled my all of my down-low garments down.

I scrunched up my nose, squeezed my eyes shut, and lowered my bottom to a partial squat atop the bucket.

"Don't look, Stella, I'm doing it now," I announced, my eyes still closed.

The moment following that, then, I commenced the releasing of the stream.

"Oh, Emma, you gotta *hover*!" I heard Stella yell, now snapping my eyes open at her.

"I said don't look!" I shouted back, though she was now standing up and beginning to rush over to my side.

"Here, I'll help you stay up," she proclaimed as she rounded my backside and shoved her elbows under my armpits.

"I *am* hovering," I claimed, though my words didn't move her at all, and she proceeded to push my body upward by a mere half-centimeter or less.

Stella fell quiet and didn't respond to me, and I didn't, either, so... after that, the sound of my trickling urine drowning the spider in the bucket was the only audible thing in the space around us.

The noise only lasted about four more seconds, though, because... I actually hadn't needed to go at all and I imagine I only had two teaspoons of pee in my bladder to begin with.

"Thank you, Stella," I mumbled out, now reaching down to grab the side of my pants, shrugging her hands away.

"Aren't you gonna drip dry?" Stella urged out as I continued to pull my trousers back into place.

"No, thank you," I replied, beginning to turn around.

I gained eye contact with her for a second, and then she let out the tiniest sound of disgust.

"*Ew*," she muttered, her eyebrows furrowing at me.

I turned my head sideways at her.

"*Ew?*" I repeated. "*Ew?*" I paused and blinked. "Stella, I'm sorry, but if you think *that's* the grossest thing about this, then..."

"No, I know; I'm sorry," she spat back, looking down quickly, and then back up once more. "Okay, now, *move*, please."

She threw an arm out and brushed me to the side of the bucket, though I was already on the opposite of it than her, and then turned her back to me and grabbed at the front of her bright blue skinny jeans.

"Don't look because I haven't shaved yet this week," she commanded.

I crossed my arms and turned to the side wall, away from her.

"But you were allowed to watch *me* pee?" I questioned, looking down at the array of spilled children's toys all over the floor ahead.

"No, I know," I heard Stella reply. "But, if it makes you feel better..." she paused for a second, probably because she was aiming her hover right or something. "It looked pretty *okay*, okay?"

I dropped both my jaw and my arms, and then spun back toward her.

"Stella!" I shouted, though I couldn't help but emit the slightest hint of laughter after I spoke.

Stella let out a giggle back, and then I could hear her begin to empty her bladder. And, don't worry, I can assure you I was keeping my eyes *only* on the back of her head while she did so.

I looked away after a quick moment, though, once a silence started to fall around her peeing process, and then dropped my eyes to the array of children's toys still spilled onto the floor nearby, ahead and to the left. I took note of the remaining objects next to the dead babydolls, broken frisbee, and rubber duck that seemed to possibly be painted with a thick coat of blood... among them a set of very surprisingly shiny metal Hot Wheels (including two red ones, a yellow, and a dark purple), a Barbie clothed in a

dirtied blue dress, part of her face caved in slightly, and, oddly enough, a black electric fan that was both cracked in multiple places and missing about half of its plug-in cord.

I raised one brow at the mess upon the floor, and then glanced away, allowing my eyes to raise to the slits of windows near the ceiling of the room, all on the wall opposite the staircase. I took observation in their extremely thin rectangular shape (each was about 14 inches long, but only 4 tall or so), their ridiculous distance from the ground (about twice my height, though I'm only personally about 5'4), and their lack of any real view (seeing how, from what I could see, the outside of every single one of them was covered by branches and brambles, and nothing else beside sunshine visible through those). After that, I sighed inside my head and crossed my arms. And then... I listened to Stella's continuing urine stream another moment, and then... I sighed to myself, again, and then... I turned back to the toys scattered on the ground, and then... I decided to step up to the one non-tipped box behind them.

Quietly, I flipped its flaps open with my fingertips, and then peered inside of it. I instantly saw that, in the very bottom of it, a wooden topless and record-less record player sat and, on top of it, three water guns rested, one looking to be a big super-soaker and the other two shaped like smaller pistols. They were all also covered in spiderwebs, and whether or not they still contained some type of liquid inside of them, I didn't really care to know or find out.

I stepped back from the side of the box and crossed my arms at the wall a few inches in front of my face.

Oh, and Stella was *still* peeing.

"How much you got in there?" I blurted out, now snapping to the left to face Stella's face, a few feet away.

"Don't look!" she shouted.

I obeyed her command and rolled my eyes and body back to the wall.

"I told you I really had to go," she proclaimed afterward.

No joke.

I stood silently, though, and didn't reply to her. Not until after she decided to go on speaking, that is.

"Emma... we're not gonna be... *stuck* here, are we?" she quietly questioned, almost too softly to be heard atop her streaming excretions.

"No," I shot right back, though still keeping my backside to her. "And I'm sure of it, so... don't worry about it."

"Well," Stella replied. "Then... *how* are we gonna get out?"

I paused as her pee slowed down slightly... but then answered after it decided to not really stop at all.

"She's a... an old woman, Stella. Not even old, she's... like, *ancient*. We'll get her somehow."

Stella fell silent under her noises of urination, and then piped back up.

"We have to get out of here soon, though, Emma. I can't sleep on... on... concrete."

I paused.

"I don't think the concrete would be the hard part of it, Stella," I said, not even realizing the slight pun I had made until a while after I had spoken.

After that, though, I began to lean on one hip, stared at the blank wall across the room, and listened to Stella's pee as it *finally* dripped to an almost complete halt.

"Well, it seems you're done now, so," I began as I turned slowly back toward her.

"Not yet!" she shouted at me, forcing me to spin my shoulders right back around. "I gotta dry off now..."

"Ugh," I grumbled, crossing my arms and proceeding to turn toward the very far wall, still behind her back, where the dusty old refrigerator sat. I stared it down for a second, then, and, afterward, made the decision to step over to it.

"What are you doing?" Stella asked from behind.

I stopped in front of the fridge and lowered my eyes to its two parallel handles, each one looking to be coated with some type of splotchy yellow substance, little black fuzzes and short gray hairs stuck in every centimeter of every surface it covered.

"Um, nothing!" I yelled back from across the room.

However, after I had shouted, I glanced down at the unbranded purple shoes currently housing my feet, and then... well, I raised one knee up to my chest (namely my left), grabbed the sides of my ankle with one hand (throwing my other way out to my side for stability... kind of), and slid the tip of my sneaker in between the two lethally contaminated fridge handles. After that, I yanked my foot back a bit and stumbled to the side as the refrigerator door flew open in front of me.

I dropped my foot back to the floor in the process, and then stepped forward to peer inside the food closet as its insides lit up with artificially bright lights.

I closely observed the top two shelves, each holding up bags upon bags upon bags upon bags of shredded colby jack cheese (I'm guessing), all fully encrusted on their outsides with millions of dirt particles, and then moved my eyes downward to the only other shelf of any substance, the bottom one, which happened to have just one big green Tupperware-like bowl on it, its topside concealed by a layer of tin foil.

I reached out curiously to pick it up, noticing that its sides were actually very well cleaned, and then carefully raised one hand to peel back a part of the aluminum topping.

"Don't touch that!" Stella's voice suddenly screeched from *very* close behind my back.

I screamed, whipped myself around, shuddered, jumped back, and dropped the bowl to the ground all as a result of her abrupt command.

After that, I stood, frozen, my wide eyes turned into her direction.

"You don't know what could be in there!" she scolded. "It could be... acid or something!"

Finally, I relaxed my shoulders and lowered my eyebrows.

"Really, Stella, if it were acid..." I began, pausing to kneel down by the side of the bowl, now noticing that nothing about it had been altered by the fall; the bowl neither broke nor spilled anything outside of itself, and the tin foil covering still rested in the same place as before. "How would a *Tupperware* bowl hold it?"

"Well," Stella rejected as I reached out to pick the bowl up once more. "Tupperware is really strong, so..."

"Oh, please," I shot back as I rose to a stand. "What do *you* know about Tupperware?"

I locked eye contact with her, the bowl resting securely in my palms.

"We have some around the house," she answered, crossing her arms at the same time.

I raised a brow at her.

"Your dad can afford a Lambough but nothing more than Tupperware?" I asked. Stella lowered her eyes to the bowl and fell quiet.

"Well, okay," I mumbled, now switching my attention back to the container in my hands. I then lifted one thumb to the upper edge of the foil, and afterward proceeded to cautiously peel one side of it back.

I peered past the aluminum, squinted a bit, and then decided to grab the covering and rip it completely off.

I held the foil sheet out to the side, and then dropped it to the floor.

"What... is it?" Stella questioned.

I stared deep into the bowl and observed the creamy texture of the tan colored substance inside of it.

"Pudding," I stated, and then lowered my nose a tad closer to the top of it. "Butterscotch."

"Gross," Stella spat out, now turning to the side a bit. "Don't eat it, it's probably... laced with Clorox or something."

"Wasn't planning to," I commented, twisting around to place the bowl on the ground behind me. After that, I turned back to the fridge, stepped in front of it once more, and then decided to lift my foot up and wedge the tip of sneaker in between the open right side of the mechanism and the closed edge of its left door.

"Now what are you doing?" Stella whined out.

"Opening the freezer," I replied, and then separated the closed door from the rest of the refrigerator.

I kicked it back, afterward making the decision to step in front of the fogging and steaming freezer as it revealed itself to me. I then scanned the contents of every single one of its shelves and saw that the only thing that rested on them was bags upon bags upon bags upon bags of shredded hash browns, each one coated a fair amount with both ice crystals and dust.

"Sick," Stella spat out from behind me. "Close that up, Emma; it's cold."

I took a deep breath, and then obeyed her command by stepping back and smacking my foot against the outside of the freezer door, forcing it to fly shut. I followed suit with the right side opening as well, and only turned back to Stella once it had completely swung closed.

I looked her over once I faced her, noticing that her still mascara stained eyelids were pointing downward, and her cheeks were bright pink... again, *underneath* all of the smeared eyeliner.

"You, um," I began, drawing her attention back up to me. "You... You got a little..."

I stopped to motion my widespread fingers ovetop nose, mouth, forehead, and... well, *entire face*.

"Oh," Stella muttered, now bringing the back of her wrist up to wipe her under-eyes... though it only seemed to spread the dark streaks even more.

She brought her hand back down and focused her eyes on me.

"Did I get it?" she asked.

I stared at her for a long second... and then nodded.

"Pretty much," I said, though I couldn't stop my eyes from inspecting every inch of her artificially shadowed features.

And, just then, a very odd, however, *familiar* tune began to blare out from somewhere above the ceiling over our heads.

*"But to lose all my senses... That is just so typically me, baby, oh!"*

"What the hell?" I mumbled, throwing my head back to stare at the cobwebbed wood and insulation-exposed ceiling.

*"Oops, I did it again!"* I could clearly hear the vocals of Britney Spears shout out atop her classic backing track and catchy beat.

"Why is she playing that?" Stella shot out.

*"Has she done this before?"* I commented, quietly, though, as I brought my head back to level and glanced toward Stella once more.

*"I played with your heart, got lost in the game... oh, baby, baby..."* the song blared on.

And, just then, one loud pair of footsteps could be vividly heard above our heads.

*"Oops, you think I'm in love..."*

I listened past the music as the footsteps drew their way across the ceiling, toward the stairs.

"Oh, God, is she coming back?" Stella spat, throwing one hand over her mouth quickly afterward.

*"That I'm sent from above..."*

I stared blankly at Stella, didn't reply, and instead intently focused on the direction of, presumably, the crazy old woman's steps.

*"I'm not that innocent!"*

Her footsteps grew nearer to the side wall, where the staircase sat.

The music continued as I heard a fierce knock from the door above the stairs.

"No..." Stella whined out from behind her hand as I turned to left and leaped over to the bottom of the steps.

*"Girllies!"* the voice of the elderly woman shouted from the other side of the locked door.

I hurried to jump up the bottom few stairs as she went on.

*"I'm making you two a snack!"*

I finished trotting up the steps to the very top, and then stopped by the side of the door.

*"It'll be finished in a few minutes..."* I could hear her say from the other side.

I paused in place and listened to her hover outside the room for a second, and then quietly turned around as she began to audibly walk away.

I looked down at Stella from over the railing, noticing that her eyes were already flooded with waterworks and that *both* of her hands were now shielding her mouth.

*"Oops, I did it again to your heart!"* the song continued from upstairs.

"She's gone," I said to Stella, now beginning my descent back down the staircase.

"But, she'll be back..." I stopped at the bottom and gazed up at her. "So, we... we need a... a *plan* or something."

*"Oops, you think that I'm sent from above..."*

"She's gonna kill us!" Stella suddenly threw her hands down and cried out.

"Stella, shush!" I yelled back, now rushing up to her and grabbing at her shoulders.

"No, she's not... We just... gotta get ourselves out of here."

I looked right into her bloodshot eyes as the old lady's voice abruptly began squeaking out the lyrics of the song playing above us... even more loudly than the words on the track.

*"Ga' lost in 'nah game! Oh, baby, baby!"* I wrinkled my nose at Stella, who was now distractedly rubbing her eyes, as I heard her terribly pitched singing echo out in the room upstairs.

I dropped my hands from Stella's upper arms, shook my head, and then darted around her, toward the back of the room.

"Oh my God, we've got to get out of here..." I mumbled.

"Emma, I'm scared!" Stella shouted.

I ignored her, however, halted, and then scanned the various objects thrown about the room for a quick moment, focusing, as oddly as it may seem, mostly on the partially filled bucket of urine.

*"I'm na' that inn-uh-cent!"* I heard the old woman screech out from above us.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes from the ceiling to the floor.

"Tell me something I don't know," I mumbled out, and then stepped over to the side of the half-opened box resting on the floor behind the scattered arrangement of broken and soiled toys. I glanced inside of and saw that the three water guns I had uncovered before were still there.

*"Oops, ya' thank I'm in love!"*

I looked up from the box and over to the uncovered Tupperware bowl nearby where Stella stood.

*"That I'm sent from uh-bove!"*

"Stella, come here," I commanded, right before the music and woman's unnecessary belting from upstairs suddenly ceased to silence.

I watched Stella turn to face me and quietly obey.

"Stella, I have a plan," I began as another tune, though the music backing it started off a bit foreign to me, began as well from above our heads. "I need you to take that pudding... and rub it all over the stairs."

Stella squinted at me.

"With what?" she interrogated.

"Your hands or something," I spat back. "I don't care, just... try to hurry, okay?"

She paused and shook her head a little.

"Emma, that... that's gross," she bumbled out, still in the recovery phase of her previous tears and screams.

I rolled my eyes at her.

"Well, it's either that, or..." I paused and looked back down at the water guns beside me. "An even dirtier job..."

I glanced back up at her, noticing she was beginning to cross her arms.

"Just go!" I ordered, now throwing my hands at her to push her shoulder away.

"Okay..." she muttered out, turning away.

Suddenly, the foreign-sounding music from upstairs shifted to a different song, another widely popular one by Britney Spears.

*"Oh baby, baby, how was I supposed to know?"* I could hear her voice softly sing out, luckily without the accompaniment of the elderly woman's not-so-soft one.

I continued to turn back to the box beside me and knelt down in front of it as the song played on. I reached down to snatch up the three dirty, spider-webbed water guns in my arms, then, and rose back up to my feet before turning to walk over to... the pee bucket.

*"Oh baby, baby, I shouldn't have let you go..."*

I fell back down to my knees in front of the yellow pale and dropped the toy guns into my lap. After that, I grabbed up one of the small pistol-shaped ones, shook some of the dirt and grind off of it, lowered the tip of it into the bucket, carefully pulled back the pin on the back end of it, and...

Yep, I filled it up with pee.

*"Show may how 'ya wan' it tah bay!"* I could hear the old woman begin to screech out. *"I need tah know nah, ah, bay-cause!"*

I cringed at the heightened volume and slur of her words this time around as I completed filling the first gun in front of me.

*"Mah loneliness is killin' may!"* she continued, sounding more and more like a dying macaw as time went on. *"I must confess- I still ba-lieve!"*

"Oh boy," I commented, both at the sound of her screams and at my work in progress as I cautiously lowered the gun full of ammo I held to the ground beside me.

*"When I ain't wit' 'ya I lose mah mind!"*

I picked up the next small water pistol and began to repeat the entire process all over again.

*"Give may 'uh sign! Hit may bay-bay one mo' time!"*

I raised one eyebrow as I filled the gun in my hands.

"Is that an invitation?" I whispered, unable to help remarking on the lyrics of the song.

I finished the second pistol shortly after, lowered it to the ground, and then began to pick up the big super-soaker left in my lap. I held it up in front of my face for a short second and smirked just a tad.

"Ah, yeah..." I mumbled, now dunking the tip of the large green and orange colored machine gun-shaped water soaker into the remaining liquid in the bucket.

The woman's voice, very thankfully, quieted from above my head as I heard Britney jam on.

*"Oh pretty baby, there's nothing that I wouldn't do... It's not the way I planned it!"*

I continued to soak up every last ounce of urine into the super soaker as Stella piped up from somewhere far on my left.

"Okay, Emma," she said, and I turned my head into her direction to see her approach my side with the green Tupperware bowl held way out to her one side.

"I did what you told me to do," she finished, now releasing the bowl to drop and crash right to the floor below.

I stared at the bowl as it bounced and rolled to a stop a foot away from me and noticed that it was only about half empty, *and* all of the outside edges of the bowl seemed to be covered in more pudding than was still left inside of it.

"Are you... *sure?*" I interrogated, pausing my work to focus back on her face.

Stella crossed her arms, and I also noticed that her hands were completely clean and pudding-free.

"Yes," she simply stated.



I took a deep breath and gazed back at the bucket in front of myself as the woman upstairs commenced screeching to the chorus of the Britney Spears song once again.

"And what are you... *doing*, Emma!" Stella asked in the same moment, her tone very obviously concerned.

I finished up with the gun I held and stood back up, leaving it in my hands. After that, I glanced over at her and answered.

"Saving our lives, Stella."

I pursed my lips at her confused expression, and then nodded.

"I'm... saving our lives," I repeated, now turning back to the guns resting by my feet.

I listened as the lady ceased singing once more and left the words of the bridge up to Britney.

*"Oh baby, baby... how was I supposed to know?"*

After that, I crouched back down and snatched the two pistols up with one hand.

"Here," I said, turning to Stella. "These two are for you."

Stella immediately threw her palms up in front of her face.

"Ew, Emma, no!" she blurted out.

"Stella," I shot back. "You have to get your hands dirty *sometime!*"

Stella lowered her hands and crinkled her nose at me.

Just then, though, we both heard a loud bang come from upstairs, followed by the stomping of, most likely, the old woman's feet above our heads.

"She's coming!" I yelled out.

"Oh my God, oh my God," Stella spat out, snatching the two mini guns from my hand and running, for whatever reason, right behind my back.

*"I must confess, that ma' loneliness,"* the elderly screeching bird shouted out. *"/s killin' may nah-ah-ah-ah!"*

"Stella, hide!" I commanded, now bolting toward the refrigerator against the far wall.

"And when she comes, shoot at her eyes!"

*"Don't ya' know I still ba-lieve!"*

I heard Stella let out a loud whine as I hurried to hide myself behind the side of the fridge, and then turned to see her proceed to crouch down behind the yellow bucket. After that, I heard the woman's steps get closer to the closed doorway above the stairs.

*"And give may a si-ei-ei-ei-ign!"*

I ducked back behind the freezer with my large water gun cocked and in-hand.

And then, suddenly, I heard the entrance to the room slam open and against the wall.

*"Hit may bay-bay one mo' time!"* her voice belted out, even clearer and louder than before.

I poked just my head out from behind the fridge to see the woman begin to trot down the concrete steps, noticing that she had both a box of *shredded* wheat in one hand and a bag of *shredded* lettuce in the other, and that she also hadn't even bothered to shut the door behind herself.

"Oh, girlies!" she yelled out over the loud pop music in the background. "I brought you a snack!"

I watched her near the end of the stairs, and then completely miss stepping on the tiny traces of pudding Stella had, I guess, *tried* to put down on the bottom two steps.

Once her feet had hit the floor at the very bottom, though, I shot a nodding glance over to Stella, and then pounced out from behind the dusty freezer door.

"Arg!" I screamed out, throwing the super-soaker filled with fresh, still warm urine up to my chest. And then I grabbed at the large pin-like mechanism on the back end of the machine gun resembling water weapon and smashed it inward, aiming the nozzle entirely at the unexpectant woman's expression.

And if you can imagine all of that happening in slow-motion with Britney Spears soul-singing '*it's killing me now!*' in the background, then triple bonus points go out to you.

I continued to scream out as I watched the stream of bright yellow splash the crazy lady directly in her nose, eyes, and... open mouth.

"Yeek!" Stella oddly sounded out from somewhere on the right, and I glanced over to her direction momentarily to witness her jump out from behind the yellow pale, knock it over to the side, and throw her two pistols up at the woman as well. She then began to squirt two stinging streams from the pistol's almost realistic triggers, though hers didn't seem to shoot as efficiently as my large one and fell short at the woman's hips.

The lady screamed out, drawing my attention back to her, and then threw both her box of wheat and bag of lettuce right at me. I dodged them pretty easily, though, and continued to shoot what remained of my fighter fluids at her head as she turned around and charged back to the stairs.

"No!" I shouted as she whipped around, and then threw my gun down and leaped at her backside.

"Why, Erica!" the lady screeched out as I jumped on her back and pushed her down to the cold, hard ground.

And, at the same time... Stella continued to shoot her pistols directly at the two of us, and a hefty amount of urine sprayed itself right across my right cheek.

And I actually had to spit a few drops out before yelling at her.

"Stella, go!" I shouted, throwing one hand up to cover my face. After a quick second, though, the shooting stream, very thankfully, ceased, and I gestured my one index finger toward the rest of the stairs in front of the woman's body. "Go, Stella, go!"

I remained on top of the old lady and threw my hand down as Stella dropped her water guns to the ground... though they fell into a puddle of pee a few inches to my side and, of course, forced another splatter of the bodily fluids to whip up to my face. I closed my eyes and scrunched up my expression, then, as I heard Stella rush around my side and begin her way up the stairs.

"Erica, stop this!" the woman screamed out as I hurriedly wiped my eyelids and cheeks with my fingertips.

"I'm not Erica!" I shouted back, now grabbing at the back collar of her tattered and soaked top.

"Erica, please!"

I glanced upward and reached forward to grab the edge of the second step from the floor in front of me with one hand.

"Emma, come on!" I could hear Stella yell at me from the doorway above.

"Erica, stop!"

I pulled myself up to a crouch, placing each of my feet on the woman's shoulder blades.

"Erica!"

I grunted out and jumped forward, landing my feet on the third step from the ground.

"No, Erica!"

I leaped to the fifth step against the wall, but then felt the woman's mangy paws grab at my ankles.

"Ah!" I screamed out as she pulled me back, forcing me to my knees, and then threw my arms over my head to grab at the stair edges ahead of me one more.

"Don't leave me, Erica!" the lady yelled.

"Emma!" I heard Stella scream out, though merely her words were of no help in my current state.

"Let me go!" I shouted, squirming and struggling to hold onto the steps.

Just then, the woman jerked my legs farther back, pulling me another two steps downward.

"Bad girl!" the woman screamed out.

"Emma!" Stella repeated my name, though, this time, I heard her footsteps rush down to my side. I glanced up to see her, then, as she knelt down and snatched up both of my wrists. "Let go of her!"

"Come back to me, Erica!"

I threw my head to one side and looked back down at the woman as she lay, completely sprawled out on the urine-puddled concrete below the stairs, and then back at Stella as she winced her expression and leaned back as far back as she possibly could.

"Let go!" Stella reiterated, right before her legs slid out in front of her and forced her to fall flat on her bottom.

"Ugh," she grumbled, dropping my hands to fend for themselves as she picked herself back up.

I scrambled to grab the edge of the step under her feet as the woman yanked my ankles back another few inches. After that, Stella stepped around my left side, and I gazed up to follow her with my eyes as she walked herself down to the side of my feet.

"I said-" she began to screech out, her hands in fists by her shoulders as she glared down at the elderly woman slowly pulling me to the ground below, who was now glaring up at her as well. "Let her go, you *crazy bitch!*"

Right after that, then, I watched Stella as she raised her right leg up by her opposite knee, swung it outwards, and delivered the harshest smash to the crazy bitch's cheek with the bottom of her crotched white ballet flat that I think I've ever witnessed in my entire life.

The elderly woman screeched out (probably) in pain, released her grasp on me, and tumbled over to her side.

"Oh my God," I mumbled out as Stella turned and ran back up the steps, around me.

"Emma, come on!" she shouted out.

I blew out a puff of air as I returned my attention in front of myself, scrambled up to a stand, and took off after Stella as she sprinted through the doorway ahead.

"Erica! Erica!" I could hear the lady cry out as I snatched the door entrance handle, jumped through the doorframe, and slammed the gateway shut behind my back.

"Lock it! Lock it!" Stella chanted out, though I was already well into the process of turning the lock switch on the front of the door knob before she did so. After I had accomplished that, then, I stepped back, glanced over at the tall wooden china cabinet on the left of the doorway, grabbed at the sides of it, and, without hesitation, tipped it over in front of the door, letting all the white and blue dishes inside of it smash out and onto the blue tiled floor under my feet.

After that, I stepped back more, spun around, and took observation of the old-fashioned blue and white colored kitchen area all around Stella and myself.

I also took notice in the Britney Spears song that was *now* playing from the far wall straight ahead.

*"All I know is I'm so happy when you're dancing there, yeah..."*

I stomped my way right up to the two small black and silver speakers resting on the countertop.

*"I'm a slave for you!"*

I then snatched up the cord connecting them with the dirty old CD player beside them and ripped it right from the socket on the mini stereo system, cutting the music promptly short.

"Don't think so," I muttered out, throwing the cord back onto the counter.

I turned back around to face Stella, then, as she brushed a chunk of hair behind her ear and piped up.

"What do we... do now?" she asked.

I opened my mouth to answer her, but then heard the old woman shout out from the basement, again.

*"Erica! Erica! Come back, Erica!"*

I pursed my lips, nodded, and then turned toward the open door leading to the next room in the house on my right.

"Get the hell out of here," I stated, right before rushing toward it.

## Mortification

Well, last Friday evening didn't exactly turn out the way I'd expected... at *all*. Neither did the weekend before that, though, either.

I guess life is just full of surprises, isn't it? I mean, you can't just *write* this stuff.

...*Can you?*

Anyway, don't worry, Stella and I made it out of the old crazy lady's evil lair about as safe and sound as we possibly could have. We escaped to a much more sane neighbor's house and, of course, called the cops about our situation. The elderly woman was, thankfully, arrested promptly and taken away to wherever arrested people go when they fall into the hands of the law.

After all of that, Stella invited me to join her the next Saturday evening/night for another stab at bonding time between the two of us... she said a third time has to be a charm. But I didn't buy into that, and I didn't even hesitate to decline the offer. I said we had a streak of bad luck going between us for whatever reason, and we needed to take time off to break it before we ended up accidentally starting a zombie virus outbreak together.

The next week of school went very smoothly and casually and such... and, when Saturday came around again, I was feeling pretty chill and made the decision to do my favorite 'lone and 'lax activity: count how many aisles I can lap in the local Walgreens in precisely thirteen minutes... without getting stopped by a store worker and without running/jogging. It's probably a dumb pastime, but it's good exercise and the Walgreens Pharmacy is one of only three stores placed within walking distance of my house.

The other two stores, then, if you're wondering, are a Shell gas station that only has two pumps in-service and (get this) a CVS Pharmacy placed directly to the left of the Walgreens. I walk up to the mini shopping complex from the right side, though, so that's really the only reason I choose to wander in Walgreens all the time.

Oh, and my all time aisle high-score is twenty-eight and a half.

So, anyway, I was approaching the big Walgreens store from the South direction, armed with nothing but my 15% battery, cracked-screen Samsung smartphone and five dollars in my back jeans pocket, observing the partially vacant parking lot, trotting along the poorly paved white sidewalk, when I noticed a middle-aged Hispanic man with a short, scruffy beard, a bit of a beer belly, and holy green wife-beater-esque tee shirt walking with his hands in his worn blue jean pockets and making his way out of the store doors and toward me.

Now, when I first spotted him, I didn't think much about him, other than how badly his deeply tanned, balding head seemed to have dandruff... but, of course, I was soon to realize that I needed to get thinking more.

I mean, I wouldn't have pointed him out and described him in complete detail if he weren't going to make a big contribution to this Saturday afternoon's story, would I?

As he passed my left side, at the same moment that I strolled by the very edge of the pharmacy store, I felt a strong grab on my left wrist, and then let out nothing but a soft and puzzled, '*huh?*' as the Mexican man pulled me around the corner of the shop and spun me around.

I glanced up to see him pull a small pistol out of the side of his pants and hold it up by his chest, though aimed away from me.

"Whoa," I mumbled out, doing nothing more than widen my eyes at the sight. My Miss Congeniality senses were obviously not tingling right then and there.

The man then moved his hand from my arm to my shoulder and pushed my back against the brick wall behind me.

"Are you my friend?" he grumbled out, now staring me dead in the eyes.

"I-uh... um..." I began to stutter out.

"I need a friend," he went on, now resituating his fingers on the handgun he held. I paused to study his stern features for the quickest moment in history.

"Y-Yeah, of course!" I urged out. "Yeah, uh... of course..." I uncomfortably forced the corners of my mouth upward. "Bu-*Buddy*."

"Oh, thank God," the man breathed out, now gazing to left a bit and removing his hand from me. "The *last one* wasn't..."

I stared at him as he shook his head and lowered his gun to his waist.

"But, I need a favor, friend," he continued, now looking right back at me.

I pushed my drooping smile back into place.

"Yeah?" I muttered out.

"I don't get on well with that cashier in there, yeah? And," he began to explain. "I need some... *gifts* for my girlfriend's half-birthday next week." He stopped and flickered his eyes down to his feet. "Some *special* gifts, yeah?" He looked back up. "Can you help me get them?"

I pursed my lips, though still forging my smile at the same time.

"Yeah, yeah, of course!" I proclaimed, now nodding my head ferociously.

"Alright," the man went on, sliding the gun back into the side of his pants and retrieving a wrinkly leather wallet from his back pocket. "I need, uh..." He trailed off as he opened the money holder and pulled out three crusty ten-dollar bills. He smoothed them out, and then held them out to me as he replaced his wallet in his jeans pocket.

"A lady vibrator," he stated, glancing to the side as his hand froze in the air with the money. "And a box of condoms."

I stared at his facial expression as it avoided my eye contact, and then carefully took the three dollars from his hand.

"No... problem," I started, turning my attention down to the bills. "*Friend*."

"Thanks," he shot back, now patting a hand on my shoulder once more. "Uh... what was your name?"

I shook my eyes away from the cash and looked back up at him, promptly responding afterward.

"Emma."

The man flashed a smile and stepped back a tad, taking his hand with him.

"*Mark*," he directed. "And I really appreciate it, yeah, Emma." He nodded. "I'll be waiting in my pickup over there, yeah?" He tipped his head to the vast parking lot on my right, and I followed his gesture to see only three vacant vehicles in the area: two black SUVs and one chipping and rusting red '05 Ford pickup truck.

"Got it," I nodded slightly, and then turned back to him.

"Oh, and get a pack of gum if there's enough money there," Mark suggested. "*Hubba Bubba*, yeah?"

I forced another small smile.

"Yeah," I agreed, right before he began to step past my side.

"Thanks again, Emma," he said, patting my upper arm one more time before walking out of sight behind my back.

After he was gone, I kept my stare on the sides of the tall dead trees ahead. After another long and silent and cold and windy moment, I looked down at the three dollar bills in my one hand, and then blew out a puff of air.

I shook my head a little, and then spun around the corner of the store beside me. I glanced ahead, took a few strides forward, and then suddenly stopped.

I stared at the sliding entrance to the Walgreens, and then up to the one leading to the CVS a little farther away, and, if you were wondering why the man didn't decide to try browsing CVS as a back-up plan, like I had, it was because the entire pharmacy store front was covered with yellow 'DO NOT CROSS' police tape.

Lord.

I shook my gaze away from the CVS, though, shoved the wad of paper cash from my hand into the side pocket of my light gray hoodie, and approached the Walgreen's front door for myself. After the doors to the big shop slid automatically to either side and revealed the wonderful world awaiting on the other side, then, I took a few steps inside and, curiously, peered toward the cashier counter on the immediate left.

However, no one currently stood either in front of it *or* behind it.

"Okay..." I mumbled to myself, and then continued to pace further into the guts of the store. I passed by an aisle displaying about a million 99 cent birthday cards, another walkway full of belated Valentine's Day gifts, and the passageway that contained and exhibited an excessive amount of alcoholic beverages for a health-oriented pharmacy store before catching glimpse of a multi-magazine display.

And then I had to stop.

*Because US Weekly said Taylor Swift was pregnant.*

"What..." I uttered out, instantly reaching out to snatch up the front issue, eyeing the detailed image of Miss Swift herself looking dead-panned in a bloody zombie costume. Probably not the picture I would have chosen, given the headline it needed to uphold, though.

I turned the tiny book sideways in my hands and prepared to flip it open, but then froze.

"What am I doing..." I whispered, now lowering the magazine back to its original shelf.

*I don't have time for this...*

I released my grip on the light, smooth paper and spun to the left.

I slid one foot forward, and then froze... again.

"Well," I continued to speak to myself, now turning back to the stand beside me.

*Maybe there'll be enough money leftover...*

I reached out to gently touch the tips of my fingers against the open edges of the US magazine.

I stared at it a bit longingly for a second, and then shook my head.

"No," I muttered, twisting away once more.

I mean, the man has a *possibly* loaded gun... and he might not like his personal shopping funds thrown away on tabloids talking about Taylor Swift's *possible* pregnancy.

I stepped away from the rack, officially, and made my way through the aisle on my left, one full of boxed cake mixes, cases upon cases of Pepsi and Coca-Cola products, and a few bouquets of dying red roses, though the bright green display sign behind them claimed they were the 'freshest gifts on the block!', which was probably true... seeing how no other open convenience store actually existed on this block.

After passing by all of that, however, I entered another wide, empty walkway, the one that separated the store into left and right. I had just come from the right, though, so I decided to continue forward a bit, and then swerved into an aisle on the lefthand side, where I had believed the 'sexual health products' to reside. And I was correct, of course, because I had wandered this store precisely eighty laps in the past sixty days and the setup never changes, so I entered the mini display-filled hallway, and then stepped directly in front of the large set-up of *personal massagers*.

I ran my eyes over *The Pulser*, *The Bullet*, *The Innovator*, *The Sensorista*, *The Tire Deflator*, and... an endless array more of purple, pink, and green packaged vibrators, crossed my arms, and then leaned onto one hip.

"Good Lord," I muttered out.

Just then, miraculously enough, the relaxed voice of a young man piped up from, I guess, somewhere on my close right.

"*Finding everything okay, honey?*"

I threw my hands down and jumped in place a bit right before I swerved my body into the direction of his voice to come nearly face-to-face with a tall, dark-skinned man wearing kakis and a blue tee shirt with the Walgreen's logo imprinted on its breast, possessing the most subtle afro I've ever seen.

Well, I guess face-to-face is a bit of an overstatement, but he was standing about two to three feet away, preparing to drop a probably very heavy, large box onto the tile beside his Air Jordan-ed feet.

"I, uh," I began to urge back at him as he tossed down the box and kneeled in front of it. "I'm... *good*, thank you."

"Kay," he uttered back, afterward grunting a little as he muscled the strip of packaging tape off the top of his package.

I stared at him as he proceeded to open the giant container, and then turned gradually back to the army of vibrators staring *me* down. I leaned back a little, then, and looked them observingly over once more.

"This one's a best seller," the man piped up, now stepped up to my side to place three Tiffany-blue boxes on an empty spot on the shelf at my eye level. I squinted to read the label on it, and when I came to see the name '*The Twisty Dilly Bar*'... I did nothing but resist the slightest giggle and let out the quietest '*ah*' in false admiration.

I looked over at the man a little more when he stepped back to his box and squatted down to retrieve two more identical blue packages. I stepped to the side a bit, then, and watched him as he stocked them right in front of the others.

"Or..." he began, again, twisting to face me for a moment, and then turning back to point at the green *Innovator* that rested on the top shelf. "That one's pretty good, too."

He glanced back at me. "My ex-boyfriend really liked it."

I looked over at the massager's box for a second, then turned back to him and silently nodded.



"Course, that was before..." he went on, pausing to raise his hands to his hips and turn his head to the opposite hand side of the aisle, right before his voice turned deep and raspy. "*The incident...*"

I widened my eyes at him, but he suddenly froze up, staring at a stack of packaged apple juice boxes. I waited a good moment or two for him to move or speak up or... *blink*, but, when it became eerily obviously he wasn't going to, I took the liberty of breaking my own unease.

"So, um, you'd recommend that one?" I asked, now stepped forward and reaching up to grab a box of the kind he had pointed to.

Right then, though, he spun back toward me and slapped my hand straight down before I could even touch it.

"No, no, no, no," he ordered as I jerked back a bit and turned my wide eyes back to him.

He shook his head at me and let out a quiet '*tsk*' sound.

"Here," he went on, looking back at the rack in front of us as he reached out to snatch up the front *Twisty Dilly Bar*. "This one's a lot... safer."

He twisted back to me and held the small box out by its thin edges.

I raised my eyebrows as I guided my eyes down to the little package and took it up in my own hands.

"Easier to handle, too," he commented, now turning around to step back to his box a few feet away.

I leaned back a bit and scanned the 'features' described on the back of the blue cardboard.

*Multiple speeds, waterproof, silicon, and, most importantly, a smooth glittery appearance.*

All for one low price of 14.99, too. Not bad for such a small package.

"You'll thank me later," I heard the man say.

I looked the box over once more, flipping it over in my hands a bit, noticing, though, that no picture of this grand device was to be seen anywhere on it.

"Thanks," I replied, now glancing up to the man's direction.

However, he had suddenly disappeared, and so had the box he had once dropped to the floor in front of me.

I stared at the empty area of aisle in front of me, and then whipped myself around to inspect the vacant stretch of walkway behind me as well.

"Uh," I mumbled out, turning to look once again both on my left, and then my right, as I found that the mysterious mystical man was still actually nowhere to be seen. Nor was he able to be heard, and the store seemed to be completely dead silent, other than the quiet hum of some Michael Bubl  song on the pharmacy's radio speakers.

"Okay," I whispered, twisting back to face the rack of packaged massagers, noticing that they all looked more fully stocked than they had prior to the man leaving... but that, I suppose could have been my imagination. What couldn't have been a figment of my imagination, however, was the sudden appearance of a yellow sticky note attached to the price label display underneath the row of *Innovators*.

I squinted as I reached out to carefully detach it and silently read what was written on it in thin-point black sharpie: *You're welcome.*

I stared blankly at the little piece of paper a second, then glanced up to look down both empty ends of the aisle once again, and, after that... decided to gently press the fresh, sticky edge of the pastel post-it back on the price sticker where it originally resided.

"Well," I mumbled, turning back to left and taking a step forward. I looked ahead to the next section of buyable products, oddly enough being boxes of Cheez-its and Ritz crackers... and then the next, which just happened to be a large display of packages upon packages of condoms.

"Lord," I grumbled, gliding my eyes over the endless selection of contraceptives as I stepped to a stop in front of them, the *Dilly Bar* still in-hand.

My eyes followed the first two lines, scanning everything from *cherry flavored to extra large, ultra ribbed, energized, triple ecstasy camouflage* (all in one).

I let out a sigh inside my head, and then reached one hand up to the middle shelf in front of me.

I aimed my fingertips towards the *super sensitive* box on the far left, then swiped them down to the *bare touch* one on the opposite end, then dropped my arm back to my side and leaned onto one hip.

I surveyed the *variety* package one lengthy time more, and then shook my head a little.

"Oh, hell," I mumbled, now reaching out and swiping the box of *regular sized, strawberry flavored, 'for her pleasure'* condoms directly in the center of the whole exhibition.

I joined it with the packaged vibrator in my other hand, then spun around and trotted back out of the aisle the way I had come. I passed through the vacant walkways full of Little Debbie's silhouette, expired orange soda pop, and the 'fresh' roses that were much too wilted to give life to Belle's Beast, as well as paced past the tabloids full of Taylor Swift and, probably, the Kardashians, too, before I reached the edge of the front check-out line area, where we all know there was actually no real *line* and probably never has been.

I watched as one lone middle-aged woman in hot pink leopard print pajama shorts and long, ratty dijon-colored hair picked up a light Walgreen's branded plastic bag from the front counter, right before I paused to glance down at the stacks of packs of gum and such under the far end of the it beside me.

"Have a good one!" a man yelled out nearby, his voice strong but strained by chewing on something or other, or so I think.

I knelt down a bit, though, to get a better look at the selection of gum set before me, and only stood back up once I had snatched up a bright pink plastic roll of sparkly-labeled *Hubba Bubba Bubble Gum*. After that, I stepped forward and approached the pay counter, where some man, presumably the cashier, was hunched completely over on the other side, giving me only a view of his backside as I noisily placed the three items I planned on purchasing on the countertop between us.

I fell quiet as I listened to him make a soft crunching noise, and then slid my hands down to my sides as he began to stand back up straight.

And then he turned around to face me.

And then I *drastically* widened my eyes.

"Hey, Emma!" he greeted with a slightly full mouth of potato chips.

*Mr. Mortinez.*

"Wow, um," I began, hurrying to break my suddenly frozen trace. "H-Hi! I... didn't know..." I paused and tilted my head to the side a bit, my eyes squinted. "You worked here..."

"Yeah, just on weekends," he replied, right after clearing his throat and revealing his true vocal identity with his succulent Hispanic accent.

And I couldn't help but stare into his deep and dirty brown eyes as he went on.

"My aunt's the manager and she needed some extra help, so..." he stopped to raise his hands out by his sides. "Here I am!"

He chuckled and I swooned back a tad as I forced a hefty giggle back.

"So, you get everything okay?" he continued, now lowering his gaze and bringing one hand towards the *risqué* items I had placed upon the counter.

I followed his gaze, and then felt my heart jump an extra beat.

"Oh!" I yelled out, reaching out instinctively to cover the products with both hands.

"Um, actually..." I slid them inward and regained his (seductively beautiful) eye contact.

"I... I *didn't!* I..." I attempted to sweep the items into my arms under the counter, but I, of course, failed, and everything tumbled down to smack the tile floor by my feet.

"Oops..." I mumbled, crouching down to retrieve the packages out of his sight. After I had a hold on each one of them, though, I popped back up and looked back at Mr. Mortinez, keeping my hands well below the counter's level.

"I..." I began, then stopped and flashed a wide smile at his narrowed eyebrows. "I forgot something, actually, so, I... I'll go..." I faded my smile as his brows raised, and then I nodded to my left. "Get that."

He smiled subtly, but extremely sweetly.

"Okay, Emma," he agreed as I took a step back to the left.

I continued to show my forcibly bright smile at him, nodded, and then spun around to hurriedly trot away from the counter. I brought my intended purchases above my waist, and then held them close to my stomach while I shuffled to the back of the store, only stopping once I reached the side of the magazine stand I had spent significant time at previously.

I paused in place for a long moment and stared down at the *Us Weekly* magazine's front cover.

"What would *you* do, Tay?" I whispered.

I glanced up and paced to the side of the paper display, keeping a close to death grip on the items in my clutches the whole time.

So, here's what was all on my mind in that point in time.

I was really the true definition of 'caught between a rock and a hard place'.

I couldn't go up to the counter and let *Mr. Mortinez*, the Hispanic-ly dreamy man of my dreams, check out a *pack of condoms* and a *vibrator* for me; he'd probably think I'm really... I don't know, but you probably do, and it's not a good impression on your future-possibly-likely husband.

Secondly... I couldn't just *not* get those two things, because... well, there was another fully-well-grown Hispanic man in a crusty old pick-up outside waiting for me to return with his requested items with an actual *gun*.

And, if you were wondering, Mr. Mortinez is the rock, because I'm ninety-seven point eight percent sure he has rock hard abs *almost* as great as Dwayne Johnson's under that blue Walgreen logo-imprinted polo.

Still, though, this was turning up to be a real big predicament.

"Ugh," I grumbled to myself, throwing my head back and spinning to face the magazine rack one more time.

And then, miraculously, of course, an old yet familiar tune began to softly play on the store speakers from far away.

*"It's strange to think the songs we used to sing, the smiles, the flowers, everything... is gone..."*

"Oh, Lord..." I mumbled, now turning to rest my head against the side of stand and close my eyes as I listened to the wise words of none other than *Taylor Swift* speak to me.

*"You say that you'd take it all back, given one chance; it was a moment of weakness, and you said yes..."*

I pursed my lips as I opened my eyes and listened to her go on criticizing my personal actions.

*"You should've said no; you should've gone home; you should've thought twice before you let it all go!"*

I shook my head while I pushed myself away from the magazine display.

*"You should've known that word 'bout what you did with her'd get back to me... And I should've been there in the back of your mind; shouldn't be asking myself why!"*

"Okay," I muttered out, beginning to tune the song out a bit as I spun to the right and loosened my grasp on the three products in my hands. I stared down at their packaging for a few moments, and then... tried to formulate a plan.

However, the only things that could come to mind were my own recreated images of T. Swift with a baby bump... and then a good ol' phrase of advisability.

*WWMCD?*

I nodded to myself, and then turned to actually set my three chosen items of purchase down on an empty rack of the magazine stand. I spun back around and, after that, took off toward the front of the store once more.

*"You say that the past is the past; you need one chance; it was a moment of weakness..."* I could hear Taylor's voice play in the background of the large shopping area.

I continued to forge my way to the front doors, though, and, once I was starting to pass by the front counter again, I slowed and turned toward where Mr. Mortinez still stood, munching on salted potato chips, his arms crossed in front of himself and his backside leaning casually against the side of the cash register.

I halted as he glanced up at me, and then spoke to him.

"I actually forgot my... my *wallet*, so that's... what I actually forgot," I declared, now pointing towards the sliding doors ahead of where I stood.

Mr. Mortinez raised the corners of his mouth to his chipmunk cheeks and flashed a quick thumbs up with his free hand, the one not currently occupied with containing a good handful and a half of thin yellow chip crumbs.

I flashed a wide, teeth-bearing grin of my own back, and then turned to rush past the auto-sliding doors, of which almost didn't even open in time because I was hurrying

so hurriedly. They also could, of course, have been delayed on account of being broken or damaged or something, because we all know how great everything in this one horse town is, but I'd prefer to think that it was really because my determination and momentum was too great for the exit's sensors to handle.

Either way, I heavily heaved myself outside at the same moment that Taylor belted out "*you should've said no, baby, and you might still have me!*"

I stopped, then, and scanned the parking lot until I spotted the rusted red pickup off in the far left corner, isolated from every one of the four other vehicles in the area.

Immediately, I scuffled my way all the way over to it, noticed that the Mexican man known as Mark was sitting behind the wheel with the engine off but the speakers blaring with bass, the windows all rolled up, and his attention down at... something in his lap.

I stopped directly in front of the driver's side door and stared slightly up at the side of his physique as he continued to distractedly look downward.

I paused with a deep breath, and then reached up to tap on the window with two light blue-painted fingernails.

Mark jerked his head up, and then glanced directly into my direction as I pulled my hand back and waved slightly.

He opened his mouth into a smile as he cranked the window separating us down.

I lowered my hand as a blast of some stone-cold, curse-spitting unidentified male rapper's voice struck me in the face, and then leaned forward a little as Mark began to speak to me.

"You get the stuff?" he questioned, now turning the radio noise down for me to reply back.

I opened my mouth for a second, but suddenly lost all the great words of strength and vigor I had planned to speak to him before throwing the wad of cash he had given to me at his face and sprinting off down the street.

And, yeah, that had *actually* been my amazing plan in the minutes leading up to the moment that I came face to face once more with the armed and demanding perpetrator.

"Um," I eventually started, glancing down at my feet for a split second. "Actually, I needed to know..." I looked back up at his expectant expression. "What *size* of condoms did you... need?"

He raised a brow at me.

"They come in *sizes*?" he asked.

I stared, unblinking, at him for a long moment, then nodded.

"Wow," he muttered, turning his head toward the passenger seat for a quick second. "Fancy."

He glanced down at the steering wheel in front of himself a moment longer, and then twisted back to me.

"Well, what all sizes are there?" he interrogated of me.

I paused.

"Well, there's..." I answered, gazing toward back to the store as I went on. "Regular... large... extra large..."

"Well, is regular, like," Mark responded, grabbing my attention back to him. He cocked his head to the side a tad and squinted a bit as he continued. "Medium? Or... small? Or..."

I tilted my head a little as well.

"Medium, probably," I said, before he could even completely finish.

He pursed his lips and nodded, then looked forward, then back at me.

"Medium's okay, yeah," he stated.

I nodded, and then gazed downward.

"Okay, I'll get-" I started, though he cut me off before I could finish.

"Or maybe large..."

I looked up at him as he seemed to stare down at the pavement behind my left side.

"Or..." he mumbled, right before returning his eyes to me. "How do you *know* what size to get?"

I continued silent eye contact with him for a moment too long after that.

"Uh," I began, now leaning onto one hip and looking down to the truck's front flattening tire. "I think you just... kind of... *know*, but..." I glanced up once again. "I'd just get regular if you're not really sure."

He nodded and resituated in his seat.

"Yeah, yeah, you're right," he said. "Regular's probably good, yeah."

I slid my left foot away from the truck.

"Okay, that's," I declared. "All I needed to know, so..."

"Hey," Mark urged, stopping me in my tracks and forcing me to look back over at him.

He smiled a bit.

"Thanks again, *Emily*," he said.

I paused, and then smiled back.

"Yeah, no... problem," I nodded, and then spun back toward the Walgreens store.

After that, I trotted quickly away, encountering absolutely nothing and no one else until I came to reenter the shop once more.

Once passing by the doors, then, I found myself greeted with the sound of some older Maroon Five song and the sight of Mr. Mortinez checking out a carton of eggs and a half gallon jug of milk for an elderly, hunched man with very thin, gray hair.

I only shot a glance at the two for a second, though, before rushing past and making my way to the trusty magazine stand at the very back end of the store, where I had left my three intended purchases before. After I reached that, then, I stopped and stared down at the Twisty Dilly Bar, the pack of *regular* sized strawberry flavored condoms, and the bright pink roll of bubblegum tape resting on the rack where they were last left by my hands.

I took a deep breath, and then snatched every item back up.

"I'm doing a good deed," I mumbled to myself, now whipping around and stepping lightly to the check out counter far ahead yet again. "I'm a good samaritan... I will one day be rewarded for my good karma..."

I quieted myself as I approached the end of the counter, where the old man was gathering his bags and turning toward the doors.

"Have a good one," I heard Mr. Mortinez's voice say as I stepped up behind the elder.

I kept my eyesight down as I placed the items in my hands onto the countertop.

"Emma!" Mr. Mortinez cheered, forcing my glance to shift up to his gleaming expression. "You have money now, right?"

I couldn't help but push a smile back at him as I replied.

"I *sure* do!"

"Good," he laughed out, now turning his attention down as he reached for the top item in my shopping pile: the condoms.

I felt my upper lip break out in a bit of a sweat as he picked the package up and flipped it over, his eyes squinting intently at it.

"Those are for my..." I began to yank out of my body. "My *cousin*."

I leaned to one side and rested one palm atop the counter as he silently nodded and scanned the bottom of the box on his register system.

I took a breath as he put the item in a bag and reached for the next: the vibrator.

"And *that*," I began while he brought the product up for observation. "That's for my... my *grandma*."

I turned my head to the side and wrinkled my nose a tad, right before the quietest chuckle erupted from Mr. Mortinez.

I leaned to my other hip and looked down at his hands as he scanned the box.

"She doesn't get out much," I went on, probably unnecessarily. "She's lived over at Oaky Heights ever since my grandpa passed."

I stared down at the remaining item on the counter as Mr. Mortinez bagged the *Twisty Dilly Bar*.

"God rest his soul..." I mumbled.

"And this?" he piped up as he snatched up the gum and held it out for me to see.

I studied his soft smile for a second, and then jumped to a reply.

"That's for my neighbor," I stated. "His name's Mark..."

"I have a neighbor named Mark, too," Mr. Mortinez replied, now scanning and bagging the final item. "He's a real ass, though."

"Oh, yeah?" I questioned as he glanced back up at me.

"Yeah," he said. "Always throwing rubber snakes in my yard and bragging about his..." He paused to make air quote gestures with both hands. "*Girlfriend*."

I raised my brows at him.

"Oh, yeah, I..." I replied as he turned toward the cash register on his left. "I know those types of..." I stopped to shift in place. "People."

"Yeah," Mr. Mortinez sighed out, pressing a few buttons on the register keyboard in front of him. "Twenty-eight ninety-five today."

"Oh," I spat out, now ripping the three ten-dollar bills from my front jean pocket and handing them over to him.

"And, one time," he went on while he took the cash from me. "My girlfriend came over while he was outside, and we were outside..." He paused to exchange my dollars for a small hunk of change from the cash drawer. "And then he yelled at her..." He turned back to me and slapped the one dollar and one nickel onto the counter between us. "'You look a lot different than the girl that was over there last night!'"

I raised my eyebrows, again.

"And she wasn't just a..." I began, raising my fingers into air quotes as he had done previously. "*Girlfriend*?"

Mr. Mortinez smiled.

But I didn't.

Since when does the hottest Hispanic teacher at Central Tarket County High have a *girlfriend*?

"No, it was my *sister* the night before," he explained as I reached out to slide the extra money from the counter. "But she didn't buy into that... and, anyway, she's my *ex* now."

Oh, thank you God.

Finally, I smiled back at Mr. Mortinez.

"Well, that's just... too bad," I stated as he grabbed the plastic bag he had placed my purchases in and set it up on the countertop.

"Yeah, but," he replied, taking a step back from the register. "You know what they say- there's plenty of fish in the sea."

I took up the white, red logo bag and couldn't help but smile again at him.

"There sure are," I said.

"Yes," Mr. Mortinez agreed while I took a step back. "But... you have a good one, Emma."

I nodded at him.

"I'll try," I proclaimed, right before turning toward the near exit.

I heard him laugh behind me, and then yelled out one final parting before I left.

"See you on Monday!"

"See you," I heard him finish as I completely exited the building.

Once outside, I started in the direction of the old red Ford and, after eventually reaching it, I caught glimpse of the Mexican Mark catching gaze of me as I approached the driver's side door where he sat.

I stood aback and waited for him to manually roll his window down, both the plastic shopping bag and excess money clutched in my hands.

"Hey, thanks, friend!" he praised, smiling slightly at the sight of the bagged merchandise.

I dropped the money into the bag, and then held it all up to him.

"I hope your girlfriend likes it," I said as he took the plastic handles away from me.

"My..." he began to reply. "*Oh, yeah, she will.*"

I leaned back on my heels and watched him peer into the bag.

"Can I..." I started back. "Um, *go*, now?"

"Yeah, yeah," Mark responded, but, as soon as I turned to leave, he, of course, stopped me once more.

"Hey, you seein' anybody?" he asked while I twisted back to face him. "'Cause I got a nephew about your age; he goes to Wayside Elementary."

Wayside Elementary.

"Uh," I began to answer. "No, I'm... *taken*, sorry."

"Oh, alright," he said, looking back down to the bag in his lap. "But, hey..." He paused to rummage through the packages inside, and then turned back to me. "For all your help, friend."

He proceeded to hold out one single thin, black packaged condom through the window slit.

I nodded, and then took it with a forced smile.



"Thanks," I muttered, right before shoving it in my front pants pocket and returning my attention to the side.

"Really appreciate it!" Mark yelled.

"You're welcome," I mumbled back, and then proceeded to step away from the truck and toward the sidewalk ahead, not even looking back when he shouted one final time at me.

*"And maybe we'll be lucky enough to meet again, yeah?"*

## The Bitching Hour

And now, thinking of luck, I really believe I must have none. Not even zero, actually; it's a negative amount by this point in time.

So, picture this: after a long, stressful afternoon of purchasing vibrators and condoms and such for a middle-aged Mexican man's probably imaginary girlfriend, a.k.a. the arch nemesis neighbor of my beautiful future Costa Rican soulmate, I decided I needed a relaxing evening of me-time. A.k.a. time for me to put on my fuzzy llama-imprinted pajama pants and lay in bed watching Bigfoot documentaries while simultaneously eating manually mega-stuffed Oreo cookies and reading up on the *false* Taylor Swift pregnancy scare of 'last Wednesday morning'.

It didn't take long, though, before I fell fast asleep and began to dream of feasting on Taco Bell nachos and quesadillas for a belated Thanksgiving Day.

But then, of course, we all know that it seems like we wake up just as quick as we dive into deep rest, even if we get a full five to fourteen hours of sleep in a night.

This time, however, I think I might have *actually* woken up just as fast as I had fallen asleep.

Because... well, here's what went down.

First, I opened my eyes (duh). Then, I sat up. And then... as I slowly came into consciousness, I realized that something was definitely up.

*Why?*

Well, probably because... oh, I don't know, but maybe the fact that I found my wrists to be tied together by a scratchy thick rope, of which was connected to a large-trunked tree behind me, of which my back rested against, as well as my surroundings of dark nighttime forest all around.

Immediately following my observations, then, I screamed.

"*Can it!*" I heard some man's voice shout out from behind where I sat on the cold, damp and dirty ground, and then fell quiet as a tall figure in all long black clothing, including a ski mask and a baseball cap, walked around my side.

I stared at up at, presumably, *him* for a moment.

"Who are you?" I questioned.

He slid his hands up to his hips, and then took a step back.

"Your worst nightmare," he replied.

I squinted as he both turned toward and stepped behind my back.

Well, I don't know if I'd say that, though... I've always thought of my worst nightmare being the cancellation of *The Big Bang Theory* or the end of Adam Lavigne's career or something of the sort.

I guess this can be a close second, third, or fourth, though.

I craned my neck to see him disappear behind the tree I was knotted to, and then decided to stand up, since nothing was really keeping my attached to the ground. At the same moment, then, I looked down to notice I was still wearing my llama pajamas, though I was also wearing my black dress flats and thick white sweatshirt of which had not been washed in, very obviously, a few good, long months.

At least whoever had, I guess, decided to kidnap me and drag me out to the center of the woods in the middle of the night was kind enough to keep me somewhat comfortable in the chilly early spring Wisconsin temperatures.

I stepped to the side, my hands down in front of myself, to peer around the tree the man walked behind, and then saw that five other similarly dressed individuals were making their way toward where he was now standing in anticipation from about ten feet away.

"Oh no," I mumbled out, turning back around and ducking behind my tree of captivity. "Please be a dream, please be a dream..."

Maybe, though, I really *was* dreaming. And, maybe, then... I could control the dream I had spiraled down into somehow.

"Okay," I whispered, nodding to myself as I spun around to come face-to-face with all six of the creepily costumed individuals.

"*Oh!*" I yelled out, jumping back a bit at their sudden, unexpected appearance.

"Good job, Ronnie," the one person standing in the middle said with an almost overly feminine female voice. And, though it was entirely pitch black all around us, I could see that her features were lined with heavy dark makeup behind her mask's eye holes.

"And," she went on, now crossing her black-gloved hands over her noticeably busty chest. "I'm glad to see you're awake, Emma."

I stood silently with my tied hands down in front of my waist for a long moment as she cocked her head to the side, and then decided to squint a bit toward her and her posse standing behind her.

And tried to, again, convince myself that this was all just a bad dream.

"This is not..." I started. "The Emma you're looking for..."

I paused and waved my wrists in a circle in front of myself.

"This is *not* the Emma you were supposed to kidnap," I reiterated.

The girl in the front of the pack moved her hands to her hips.

"And I'm," I continued. "Going to wake up now, so..."

I scanned the six standing a few feet in front of me, and then shifted my weight to turn around. I looked at each of the very realistic looking forest trees near ahead, and then attempted to smack my cheeks with my knotted hands.

"Please wake up..." I grumbled to myself.

"Oh, you just wish you could wake up from this, don't you?" the girl behind me questioned.

I turned myself gradually back to her.

"Kind of," I nodded a bit. "Yeah."

"Well," she responded. "That's just too bad."

Immediately after she spoke, she threw her head both forward and downward, then ripped her ski mask off and tossed her bouncy chestnut brown curls back as she revealed her face to me.

I raised my eyebrows at her.

*Miranda Lively.*

"Remember me?" she asked, placing her hands once more on her hips, right after throwing her mask to the ground below.

I pushed the corners of my mouth into a smile.

"Hey," I began back. "Yeah, Miranda... *Mandy*, funny running into *you* all the way out here, right... *girl?*"

She smirked.

"Oh, Emma Lenford," she began, crossing her arms and beginning to step toward me. "I'm sorry, but I don't think your good humor will get you out of this one."

I looked down, and then back up as she approached me and brought her face a close few inches from mine.

"Really? I was..." I muttered. "Kind of hoping it would..."

Miranda smirked, again, and then turned to pace a tad to my left.

"Now, Emma," she started. "I'm a little short on cash right now, and I need your help..."

"Getting more money?" I shot out as she turned back to me. "I... don't have much, but you can have what's left in my college savings..." I paused to flash a smile that I dearly hoped she would not see through. "*Friend.*"

She glared at me for a long second.

"What's *left*?" she interrogated.

"Yeah," I replied. "I kind of took some out a while ago to buy a new fish bowl... and a new fish... but then it died... and there really wasn't much in there to begin with, so..."

Miranda rolled her eyes and turned away to continue pacing back and forth in front of me.

"I already have the solution to my problem," she stated.

"Well, good," I commented.

"And it requires harvesting *your* blood," she said as she stopped to glare at me once more.

I widened my eyes at her.

"My... *blood*?" I uttered.

"The blood of a virgin," she added.

*Um.*

"The blood of a virgin..." I repeated, nodding slowly. "Well, uh... See, I'm not really much of a *virgin*, so-"

"Oh, please," Miranda butted in, leaning herself to one side, hands on hips once again. "I know a virgin when I see one."

"Really?" I questioned with a slightly heightened voice pitch. "Because I think a..." I paused to raise my wrists and make air-quote gestures the best I could within my constricted means. "*Virgin* can kind of mean, like, a few different things-"

"Shut up," Miranda, again, cut me short, and then glared directly at me until I lowered my hands once more and submitted to her command.

"Now," she continued, shifting in place a bit to glance to her right, away from everyone else. "When I found out that all I needed was a little virgin's blood, I figured..." She glared back over at me. "Why not the blood of the little tramp who helped conspire to shoot my cousin *Kyle Ermings*?"

*Whoa.*

Okay, I need to point out a few things here... one, since I guess I am a real pure and innocent virgin and everybody apparently knows it, why would Miranda choose to call me a 'tramp'? Seems pretty illogical to me, but whatever, I suppose.

Secondly... Kyle Ermings is Miranda Lively's cousin? (Surprisingly) New info to me. And third... I DID NOT HELP CONSPIRE TO SHOOT KYLE.

"Um, I'm sorry," I began, tilting my head a bit to the side. "But, uh... *what*?"

I squinted at her pretentious eye roll toward me.

"Oh, don't act so innocent," she ordered.

Again... aren't I *supposed* to be acting innocent?

I shook my head and lowered my eyebrows at her.

"Miranda," I started. "I swear to you- I had *nothing* to do with *anything* that happened to Kyle that one day."

"Uh huh," she skepticized, taking one step into my direction, now bringing her expression about a foot away from mine. "And you also wanted me to believe that you weren't a virgin, didn't you?"

"And I'm," I began back, searching her ridiculously thick lined eyes for a second. "I'm *not*, and you... you shouldn't really know that anyway, so..."

"You little lying bitch," she muttered out, now turning and stepping back over to her clique of masked men to the side.

I winced back from her hiss.

"Give me the bag," she uttered out soon after, and I turned to watch the one person standing at the front of the group hand a large black duffel bag over to her.

I stared, then, as the entire clan gathered around her sides, and, afterward, decided to speak up for myself.

"Are you sure you don't need, like," I began to yell at their backs. "Just some O negative blood, or... AB positive... because I think that's kind of what the *real* difference in types of blood boils down to, and you can just, like, get that from about any Red Cross post!"

I watched as each one of them dropped to a crouch, surrounding the athletic bag from all sides, and then heard a loud zipping sound.

"And my blood might not be as clean as you think!" I went on shouting, now kind of just distracting myself from whatever they were rummaging through in their luggage. "I mean, you said I'm not really that innocent, Miranda... And I can be dirty, too, like... I haven't even brushed my teeth in... almost twenty-four hours!"

"That one," I heard Miranda mumble to her fellow group members, ignoring my assertions completely.

"Or," I decided to go on, despise her obvious lack of attention. "What about AIDS, huh? I mean... I don't think I have HIV or anything, but... you can never be too safe about it, right?"

Miranda stood and spun around to step back over to me, a pretty good sized paring knife in her left hand and, of all things, a jar of what looked like to be peanut butter in her right.

"What'cha got there?" I urged out, right as she stopped a foot away from where I stood.

"Shut up and give me your wrists," she spat out.

I took a subtle step backward as she unscrewed the red peanut butter jar lid and tossed it to the ground below.

"Now, Miranda," I muttered out, taking yet another step back as she glanced up at me once more. "Remember that... that one time when... you passed me in the hall at school, and you... *kind of* smiled at me, and I didn't really smile back, because I thought you were looking at Chase Grould behind me... well, know that I really *did* want to smile back, and-"

"I said *shut up and give me your wrists!*" Miranda boomed, now throwing her knife up by her ear, positioning the tip of it perfectly toward me.

I jumped another step back and instinctively threw my glued arms up to cover my face.

"Please don't kill me!" I screeched.

"Give me your God damn hands or I'll slit your throat!" she shouted back.

Instantly following her words, I felt the side of a soft, smooth fabric grab at my hands and proceed to yank my arms back down.

I screamed out in terror as Miranda's gloved hand pushed the bottom of my dirtied white sweatshirt up to my elbow, and then threw my gaze to the side as she situated the knife in her grasp and began to press the icy cold tip against my fleshy thick skin, right in the middle area of my forearm.

I continued to screech out as I felt the blade swipe the edge of my body, letting a few involuntary tears slip in the process of feeling a small stinging sensation, and then peered back and silenced myself as I felt Miranda's grip flip my arm upside-down.

I observed as she squeezed my skin a bit and held her peanut butter container directly underneath her grasp. I watched four drops of my own blood seep out and drip into it, and afterward stared while Miranda released me and spun around.

"That's it?" I mumbled.

I dropped my arms, allowing my sweatshirt sleeve to slide atop my most recent cut, and studied her back as she stepped back to the clique of others, who proceeded to surround her in some sort of circle, all of them joining hands in the process.

"Um," I started. "Can I go now?"

Miranda began to let out a loud, eerie chuckle.

I stared as the others' voices, all of them deep and seemingly masculine, followed her suit.

Soon after they didn't stop their huddle of laughter, I glanced down at the rope knotted around my wrists, and then made the decision to begin wriggling my arms out of their grasps.

At least *try* to, I should probably clarify. Because it was unnecessarily tight, and I was senselessly unskilled when it came to girl scout-related artistries, this particular one being the art of dealing with knots.

Either way, though, I persevered in my efforts as the chuckles of the group quieted and all of their voices turned to creepy, nearly inaudible whispers. It didn't take long for them to quiet again, however, and then I peered back upward as their feet sounded into shuffles and the circle stepped back from where Miranda stood, her back to me for the time being.

I watched as she turned toward me, her one hand occupied with clutching her *Jif* peanut butter and the fingers of her other gloveless one currently shoving one heaping scoop of the thick condiment past her deeply red-lined lips.

"Is... that all it?" I questioned as she stepped into my direction.

Miranda popped her two fingers out of her mouth, and then tossed the peanut butter jar over her shoulder, letting it land somewhere in between her and the group still standing silently behind her.

"Not quite," she replied, replacing her hands on her hips while she stepped even closer toward me. "You see... you've been spending an awful lot of time around that one girl lately..."

She stopped a mere foot in front of me and glared from my feet to my face.

"What... girl?" I asked.

She smirked.

"Oh, now what was her name..." she mumbled, gazing over her shoulder for a second. "Oh, yeah." She returned her attention to me. "*Stella*, isn't it?"

I studied her harsh expression for a split second.

"Oh, *Stella*?" I urged out. "She... 's not really a friend or anything, per say, exactly, to me, anyway, so-"

"Oh, I know," Miranda shot out, nodding her head slightly. "She's just a pawn in your little plan, isn't she?"

I stared at her, blankly, for a long moment.

"Uh..." I eventually began. "What *plan*, exactly, are you referring to?"

Miranda rolled her eyes and moved her arms to a cross over her chest.

"You don't have to play dumb now, Emma," she said. "I know you're only befriending her to make it *look* like you never had any involvement with what that asshole Grayson did to Kyle... when, in reality, *you* were the whole reason it happened in the first place!"

I had widened my eyes at Miranda as her vocal volume raised, and then gazed from her to the number of masked men behind her to the tree beside me to my feet to her face once more.

"Um... I'm sorry, Miranda, I really am, but..." I paused and shook my head at her. "I don't know where you're receiving your information from because that's actually *not* what happened, and I swear to you I had nothing to do with Grayson and... well, I know I *was* actually his friend and all, but I had absolutely no idea that he was going to do anything that he did and... you know, on second thought, I actually *am* really good friends with Stella, like, *genuinely*, and-"

"Oh, shut up!" Miranda spat before I could finish.

She threw her hands back down to her hips before continuing.

"I'm not buying little miss innocent," she snapped, glancing to the side a short second. "And, anyway..." she looked back at me. "I need you to take care of a few things for me."

I squinted at her face through the darkness for a moment.

"Like, a check-up for more blood or something?" I questioned. "Because, really, if you need more, I can go to the hospital or something and just get, like, a bag drawn out for you and you won't-"

"Do you ever stop blabbering?" Miranda abruptly shot out, cutting me short a tad.

I bit my bottom lip and shrugged, then gradually glanced down to my feet.

"Just offering suggestions," I went on, after all of that.

I flickered my eyes back up to Miranda as she cocked her head to one side.

"Well, it's not helping," she proclaimed. "So..." She dropped her hands to her sides and twisted to my left, now starting up her fiendish pacing once more. "I need you to pick up something from Stella's house for me, since you two are *such good friends*..."

I held back my tongue as she spun around and paced leisurely into the other direction in front of where I still stood, tied and tired and tattered and all.

"And that would be," she continued, now glaring back over at me as she ceased walking. "Her *daddy's* credit card information."

I pursed my lips, and then nodded a slight bit.

"For... his money?" I asked, tilting my head toward my shoulder.

"I don't think that really matters," Miranda answered, crossing her arms yet again.

"Well," I replied. "It kind of does, because I just gave you that blood sacrifice for more money, right? And so... you're kind of wasting my resources if that's what it's all... about."

Miranda smirked at me.

"You have two weeks to get me the info," she stated.

I watched as she spun one-hundred and eighty degrees around and two of the completely covered people standing behind her stepped into my direction.

"Whoa, whoa, wait," I jerked out of my body.

Miranda glared at me from over one shoulder while the two people approached me from either side.

"That won't be a problem, will it?" she interrogated.

I looked up at the ski-masked face of the light-skinned individual on my right, and then did the same to the identical one on the left before snapping back to Miranda.

"I... hope not," I replied to her. "But, um, one question..." I paused as she turned more toward me and narrowed her pretty much perfectly plucked dark eyebrows. "Will anything, like, happen to me... since I kind of gave you my blood for your... uh, *thing*?"

She smirked, again.

"I don't know," she said. "Probably a few good years of bad luck in every aspect of your little miserable life or something." She shrugged. "I don't really pay attention; I don't really care."

And then she laughed.

And then every other person around her followed suit... except for me, of course. I, instead, widened my eyes and scanned the array of chuckling masked individuals all around me.

*Bad luck? In every aspect of my little miserable life?*

Nothing hilariously new to me.

Still, though, I stopped my eyes on the giggling man on my right, and waited for him to desist long enough to open his eyes and look down at me once more.

"Yeah, laugh it up, bud," I said to him, and then glanced back at Miranda ahead. "Actually, Miranda, I think, just maybe, that I actually *do* kind of have a problem with your little *plan*."

"Oh?" she shot out. "And what would that be?"

I stared across the way at her for a long few seconds.

"Well," I began. "I don't exactly... *want* to."

Miranda threw her hands down in fists and took a step forward.

"You don't *want* to?" she growled, taking another step.

"Well," I started. "I *did* say that... but, um, listen, Miranda-

"No," she spat out with another step. "You listen, you little slimy slut bitch..."

I leaned back a bit at the ring of her words.



Again, a little contradicting of a point contrasting with what she apparently already knows about me (hint: virgin or slut?) ... but, oh well, I suppose.

She threw her pointer finger up at me, took yet another step toward my face, and continued.

"You *will* do this for me, or else I guarantee you *will* regret it for a very *long* amount of your pathetic time on this Earth." She took another step, now merely a few good six inches from my body. "And if you even *think* of going to the police against me, so help me, I will..."

She shook her head and threw her hand down, then spun around and let out an ear-shattering scream.

I jumped in place at the short sound she wailed out and attempted to throw my hands overtop my ear drums, but then ended up reminding myself that my wrists were still cuffed together too tightly to lend me any protection.

I stared at the back of her head, then, as she fell back to silence. After another moment or two, I glanced around at the other still figures, and then returned my attention back to her.

I waited yet another quiet moment before piping up once more.

"Um, sorry, but... I didn't quite catch that last part, there..."

Miranda spun back around and pointed a finger at my nose once again.

"Get rid of her, *now*," she ordered. "I'm done with her tonight."

"Oh," I shot out as the two guys standing at my sides grabbed at my upper arms. "Are you... sure, Miranda? We're... done?"

She stepped back and spun around, revealing two more masked men, each holding the edges of an extremely large, black garbage bag.

"Oh, um, what's that?" I questioned, thought I received no answer from anyone and actually already knew what it was.

"See you Monday, Emma!" Miranda yelled out as the two threw the top of the plastic bag over my head.

"Oh, great," I muttered.

## Babysitting

Sunday, March 26th, 2017: I awoke to a pounding headache and the odd remnants of a very realistic dream.

Just kidding- it wasn't a dream; I also woke up to the sight of the phrase '2 weeks-bitch better have my money' scribbled onto my left wrist with the distinct scent of permanent sharpie still attached.

So, naturally, I did what any other level-headed 17 year old high school girl would do.

First, I screamed. Then, I convinced my loving and perturbed father that everything was alright and I had just witnessed a spider crawling across my stomach when he burst into my bedroom with his aluminum Louisville slugger. And then... I called up Stella Anderson, interrupted her classy mother-daughter tea and crumpet breakfast time, and told her what curse had befallen upon me the night before.

And, of course, instinctively, she initially claimed that I just *had* to be lying. And then I asked her 'why in all hell would I call you at ten a.m. on a Sunday morning just to tell you the lie that Miranda Lively dragged me deep into the Wisconsin wilderness at probably the height of witching hour in the middle of the night and slit my wrist for blood to fuel her own monetary spells and order me to retrieve your father's credit card number just for kicks?' And then Stella fell quiet for a moment... and then she delivered to me some pretty tough news.

Her dad's in China for work the next three weeks out, and neither Stella nor her mom knew any of his main bank account information.

Which... yeah, that was a hard pill to swallow, but it's not like I was *actually* going to *just* give Miranda Lively Stella Anderson's father's checking account information to save my own ass... I mean, that would just be downright unethical.

Instead, I assured Stella that she should not fret, for I had just conducted a brilliant plan. One that didn't involve calling the police and getting Miranda all boiled up to kidnap me and slit my wrists again when they found absolutely nothing wrong or shady about her hidden lifestyle choices, too.

But I didn't *tell* Stella the plan. Because I didn't actually exactly really have one. Not *yet*, that is.

After my intense phone conversation with Stella, though, I figured I had plenty of time to organize and carry out some sort of active scheme or another. I mean, I *did* have two full weeks from... I guess the night before, and I was sure my big clever brain could come up with something by then. And, if nothing really occurred to me by that time, I figured I could always sneak off to Ontario over spring break and then mysteriously never return to Tacket County ever again.

But then, in the mean time, it seemed that a surprise blizzard (or not so surprising extreme drop in temperatures during the transition from deep winter to early spring in mid-Wisconsin) was beginning to brew outside.

And then, of course, later that evening, the slightly wealthy Ms. Bodenhigger, who lives down the street in a well-off home shielded from the rest of the world by an army of dense fir trees, was in desperate need of a babysitter because her regular nanny was conveniently snowed-in in the next town over (within, somehow, a matter of hours since the blizzard had begun and left an accumulation of two whole inches) and needed to get

herself to her late-night job by five o'clock. And, since her only two last resorts were her divorced husband who lives with a scandalously new, younger wife in Miami and her eighty year old mother who is currently recovering from a recent biking accident in the local nursing home, she ended up calling every one of all five households on the block until she reached my dad and I's home phone number, where she pleaded with me for a full thirty-five seconds before I caved and agreed to watch her eight year old daughter for most of the night.

Which, then, brings us here.

"Make sure to give her plenty of water and, for God sakes, do *not* give her *any* catnip," Ms. Bodenhigger instructed as she swung her leather red Ralph Lauren handbag over her shoulder, of which was covered with a puffy hot pink coat sleeve.

And, FYI, the Bodenhigger's do not own a cat.

"Um, okay," I responded, observing her as she inched her way from the kitchen counter beside us to the front door ahead.

"And there's leftover apple pie in the fridge, chocolate ice cream in the freezer, and some Pepsi cans on the back porch, but don't let her have too much sugar, dear, please," she continued, now reaching for the door handle in front of her.

I stared at her as she proceeded to whip the glass-framed exit way out in front of herself.

"Any questions?" she asked, glancing back over at me.

I paused and glanced around the silent, spacious kitchen and dining area for a moment.

"Uh, yeah," I began, turning back to her. "Where... is she?"

The mother froze and glared at me for a second, and then looked away as she yelled out her daughter's name.

"*Briana!*"

I followed her gaze as a short, skinny girl with dark hair and pale skin sprinted into the room, pretty much a spitting image of her mom, other than her small size, that is. She skidded to a stop in her blue and white striped knee-highs and black short shorts about a foot away from the edge of the dining table on my left.

"Bri," the mother started, grabbing my attention back. "I want you to be good for..." She paused and scanned my image for a second. "*Her.*"

She nodded, and then twisted back to the half-opened door in front of herself.

"I'm always an angel, mom!" the young girl, Briana, yelled out from the dining area.

"Yeah, yeah," the mother muttered out as I watched her step out into the chilling cold wind. I waited for her to shut and seal the glass gate behind her back, and then turned toward the little girl close by on my lefthand side.

"Hi," she greeted with a smile and a bit of a wave. "I'm Bri and..." She paused to throw her hands behind her back and rocked on her heels a bit. "I want to be a ghost when I grow up!"

I smiled back at her.

"Oh, yeah?" I questioned. "A... *ghost?*"

She nodded her head so ferociously I was genuinely afraid she was about to put herself into a whiplash coma.

"Like, for the haunted walks on Halloween, or..." I began, though I trailed away pretty quickly after I reminded myself that I was communicating with an eight year old.

"No, a *real* one," she shot back, and then hopped both of her feet forward a step. "What about you?"

"Me?" I asked, cocking my head to the side a bit. "Well... I'm Emma, and, when I grow up, I want to be... Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

Bri dramatically threw her head down, bent over and let out a good laugh. I let myself chuckle out a bit, too.

"That's silly," Bri stated, straightening her back once more before shaking her head at me. "Vampires don't even exist."

I maintained my smile and raised a brow at her.

"Oh?" I muttered.

Bri threw her arms above her head and spun a full three-sixty degrees in place.

"Nope!" she shouted as she twirled.

"Well," I began as she stumbled back to a stop and faced me once again. "I never said it was a wise, million-dollar net worth career... but, anyway, are you hungry?"

Bri jumped on her toes a tad.

"Yes!" she yelled. "And I want caviar!"

I stared at her as her excitement fell to a quiet smile.

"You want," I started, smiling back a little. "*Caviar?*"

Bri nodded subtly.

"Well..." I went on. "Do you guys... *have* caviar?"

She shrugged.

I pursed my lips for a second, and then turned toward the kitchen on my right.

"Well, let's look for some... *caviar*," I declared, now stepping up to the side of the big black fridge across the room. "Not even sure where that type of cuisine would be stored, though, actually..."

I reached out to open the refrigerator door, and then scanned the array of condiments on the inside front of it. I looked at the shelves full of regular refrigerated items, like cool whip containers probably full of leftovers, stacks on stacks of YoPlait dessert-flavored yogurts, and a half ton of Lunchables pizza trays, and, after that, turned back around to see Bri approach my side.

"Maybe it'd be in the pantry..." I began to her. "Do you guys have one of those? Or a cupboard? Or a basement? An attic, maybe? Or..." I glanced back at the fridge. "Maybe it's in the freezer..."

I began to push the fridge door shut, but Bri screamed out and threw her hands against it to stop me.

"Wait!" she yelled. "It's in here..."

I pulled the door open once more and allowed it to swing back on its hinges as she slid in front of me and opened one of the middle drawers. She then yanked a clear bag from it, spun around, and held it up for me to see.

"These are," I started to read the bag's plain black label. "*Wisconsin dairy cheese curds...*"

I lowered my eyes to the bottom of the bag, where a mound of yellow colored nuggets rested.

"No," Bri stated, throwing the bag down to her side. "It's *caviar*. And it's *classy*."

I raised my eyebrows as she spun away from me and ripped the ziplock bag open.

"Okay," I mumbled, now stared aimlessly into the fridge behind her while she stepped away. "Well, do you want anything besides caviar for *dinner*?"

"Maybe..." Bri began from somewhere behind my back. "Broiled lobster with garlic lime and basil butter."

"My God," I uttered, now slamming the refrigerator door closed and turning to see her backside standing in front of the counter ahead and to the right. "Why does your mother only have enough to give me four bucks an hour when you all seem to fly out to *Dubai* for dinner every Friday night?"

I brought my hands up to my waist as Bri turned around to gaze over at me, one of her hands currently in the process of stuffing her cheeks with a good handful of cheese balls.

"You'll only get paid if I don't get any injuries," she stated through choppy bites, already snatching up another fifty-six grams of cheesy snacks.

I stared at her a second, and then nodded.

"Good to know," I said.

Then, suddenly, Bri dropped her fistful of cheese to the tiled floor below and screamed out.

"I forgot- *my show's on!*"

She then spun around on her slick sock bottoms and shot both out of the room and around the corner.

I stepped up to the side of the abandoned cheese curds on the ground ahead, and then stared down at them for a second.

"*Bri?*" I shouted out.

She took a moment to respond from the other room.

"*Yeah?*"

I continued to face the mess of cheese in front of me.

"Do you guys have a dog?" I asked.

"Yeah!" Bri answered. "His name is Chubs!"

I glanced up from the cheese, finally.

"It's fine, then," I commented, just to myself, now proceeding to walk away.

"Emma!" Bri went on. "Come watch this with me!"

I stepped around the counter edge ahead and turned to make my way into the spacious, high-ceiling living room nearby.

"I'm coming, don't worry!" I yelled back, right before approaching the side of a roomy red three-seater sofa and giant silver (fake) fireplace. After that, I scanned the far wall, noting a wide flat-screen TV of approximately sixty whopping inches and a tall glass-shelf display case full of miniature electric guitars and lion figurines, not one item over five inches in diameter, and then turned to where Bri sat, on the other couch to the right, with a tilted iPad sitting in her lap.

"Seriously," I started to her. "Do *all* of your babysitters only get four dollars an hour?"

Bri continued to flip through images on her tablet as she responded to me.

"She'll give you more if you do the dishes and there's no dog poop on the floor when she gets home," she declared.

"Oh, really?" I questioned, stepping forward to take a seat next to her on the burgundy sofa's edge. "Well, that shouldn't be too hard."

"Yeah, but," Bri objected, glancing up to gain my eye contact for a moment. "Chubs has chronic diarrhea and he's *supposed* to wear his special diapers but he gets them off sometimes and-" she stopped to take a big inhalation. "Then it just gets *everywhere*."

I narrowed my brows at her.

"Oh?" I replied.

She nodded, and then returned her attention down to the iPad.

I guess the disbanded cheese curds could really help him out, then.

"Where... is Chubs now, though?" I decided to go on to inquire.

"I don't know," Bri said. "Okay, watch!"

She threw her head upward and pointed at the television set across the way. I followed her gaze, and then watched as the tube flashed on and a picture of two (seemingly) grown men in oversized white bonnets and bibs looked to be in the process of wiping their tongues against the bottom of another man's hairy feet, of which were covered in all angles by some thin, pureed green substance while he rested on an air hockey table on his back. At the bottom of the screen, then, read in bold, black font: 'Lick that Sick Shit, Kid!'

I widened my eyes a bit at the sight.

"Oh, my..." I muttered.

Bri, however, hugged her stomach and bent over the edge of the couch in a crippling hard giggle. I glanced over at her for a second as one man's voice on the television yelled out 'trick or treat, eat my dick-stink feet!', and then raised the corners of my mouth slightly as she leaned back and looked back at me.

"What show *is* this, exactly?" I asked.

Bri continued to laugh as she answered me.

"It's a webshow," she said. "And they're all the KKK."

I dropped my forged smile and inched my gaze back to the TV.

"Um..." I began, scanning the faces of the two old boys currently licking the *pale* and hairy older man's heels, now noticing that the both of them had a *medium mocha skin tone*. "Wh-*What* did you say there, Bri?"

"They're the *C-K-K*," she repeated, though, *drastically* different than before. "It stands for *Crank Kings of Kroger*."

I breathed out a thick puff of air and turned back to her.

"Oh, thank God," I uttered, shaking my head a bit at her. "That's not what... I *thought* you said the first time."

Bri shrugged and twisted back to face the television screen.

"I said the *C-K-K*," she defended, shrugging. "They buy random things from Kroger every week and then do sick things with them."

"Oh, I get it," I remarked right after. "*CKK. Sick*." I nodded at Bri, though her eyes were now completely glued to the TV set across the room, and then shifted in place to add my gaze on top of hers.

"Clever," I mumbled to conclude my epiphany.

I then watched as the screen flickered to an image of a tan, Italian figured man in his late twenties with some kind of leaning tower of gelled hair sitting on top of his head smiled into a newscast-style microphone (one with the phrase *CKK* imprinted on it in bright red lettering), and then raised a brow as he began his situational commentary.

"Now that's some *real* sick shit, bitch! But, oh, what's *this*?" He stopped to take a white, blank notecard from the cameraman behind the picture. "We've got more coming up on the *list*!" He paused to enthusiastically bounce up and down in place. "And it looks like we've got a *gift* for our friend *Derick*!"

The camera then shifted, again, to another guy with light skin and a gold tracksuit.

"Oh, *really*, Mick?" this new man questioned into an identical microphone of his own. And, just as soon as he finished his cheesy inquiry, some silver, slimy (and hopefully dead) creature with gills was slapped across his right cheek by another person who was only partially in the frame.

"Oh!" he yelled out, squinting his eyes as the thing was flopped to the floor. "Was that a *fish*, Mick?"

The picture shot back to the first boy.

"It was the *biggest* fish there is, Derick!" he replied. "At least... the biggest one there is at *Kroger*!" He stopped to arch his back in cheap laughter. "But, we still have to see what sick things we have to *flip*... after this short break!"

The picture faded to black, and then a new picture of Jennifer Aniston rubbing white facial cream onto her cheeks was brought into focus, an Aveno-branded lotion bottle clearly displayed beside her.

"Who doesn't love radiant, beautiful skin?" she began.

And, though I have to admit I'm just *such* a sucker for radiant, beautiful, and expensively perfect skin tones, I glanced away from the television for a second, to the floor, and caught a glimpse of a small, furry tan canine with a blue and red plaid collar begin to trot into my direction from the other side of the room.

"Awe," I cooed. "Is this little Chubs?"

I leaned forward and reached both my hands out to him as he approached the sofa area.

"Probably," Bri answered, leaning back to rest her heels on the large wooden coffee table in front of her and partially in front of me.

"Oh, come here, little guy," I went on as he began to wag his short, curly tail and stepped up to my offered hands. I then proceeded to pet his thin, poufy fur coat with both palms as he halted to sit right next to, and sort of on top of, my left purple sock-covered toes.

"Wait, does he still have his diaper on?" Bri, after a short moment, piped up once more.

"Uh," I started, continuing to rub his fuzzy ears. "No, but I think he's fine, actually, right now."

Bri threw her feet down to the floor and hurried to sit up.

"Don't let him sit on your feet!" she suddenly shouted.

"What?" I questioned, still not removing my hands as I turned my head to look over at her.

"Just don't!" she yelled, throwing her hands up above her head, and then smacking them back down on the couch cushions.

I narrowed my eyebrows, and then returned my gaze back onto Chubs, who was now turning his sit into a squat directly over my left foot. And, in the exact same moment that I became aware of this, I felt a hot, liquid-like substance begin to seep onto the top of my thin sock fabric.

"Chubs!" I screeched, immediately grabbing at my left calf, bending my knee, and jerking my foot up near the side of my chest.

And, apparently, while I did this, a large portion of the smelly substance was actually *tossed* from the tips of my toes to a middle area of the bright white wall behind the sofa I sat on.

I know this because I followed the dog's excrements as it flung from my foot to the wall paneling, whipping my head to both watch it as well as avoid a run-in with my nose or mouth in the process.

"Oops," I mumbled, staring at the dog's diarrhea as it now began to drip down the wall.

"Ew!" I heard Bri condemn as I snapped my head back to the dog, who was now scampering from where I sat to the television against the far wall, liquid brown waste actually dribbling from his behind onto the spotless white carpet the entire way there.

"Chubs, stop!" I yelled, slamming my foot back to the floor and shooting up to a stand. "Wait, stop!"

I rushed forward and up to his backside, then knelt down and reached my hands out to his sides. Before I could catch a grasp on his furry skin, though, he darted to the right, tossing remnants of his sloppy puppy poo to the left as he hurried away from my fingertips.

"No, Chubs!" I shouted, bouncing back up and chasing after his trail.

However, I was soon to find out that his tracks were just as slippery as they were messy and stinky, because... well, my left foot just so happened to step directly into the center of the marked path as I was beginning to scurry away from the side of the television, causing my legs to slide out from underneath my body and forcing the rest of me to tumble down onto my backside, part of my left shoulder painfully crashing into the leg of the display cabinet next to me. I winced as I lay, then, staring up at the dimmed lights in the high ceiling above me, until I heard the variety of knickknacks on the shelves I had just collided with begin to tap and shift unsteadily with the shaking aftershock of the whole cabinetry. And then, as I saw one flip over the edge of the top ledge and begin to hurl itself into the direction of my nose via the law of gravity, I used my elbows to throw myself onto my right side, afterward covering the side of my face with my palms for a moment. After all of that, then, I peeked over my shoulder and saw that a figurine depicting a lion with a very exaggerated, ferocious teeth-bearing facial expression was glaring directly at my back from the diarrhea-infested carpet fibers as Bri could very vividly be heard cackling from across the room. Whether or she was laughing at the twisted *sick* show that was bound to lose viewers after it ran out of relevant rhymes or my terrible misfortunes, I guess we may never know, but I'd take my chances with the latter if I had to.

"Oh my," I mumbled, staring at the figure for just a second. After that, though, I pulled myself back up to my feet and continued my chase along the trail of Chubs' excrements. Even, probably, with a line of his waste running up and down the back of my shirt, I wasn't going to let that dog throw his junk all over everything in the Bodenhigger's home, partially because I'm really just that considerate of a person to other peoples' possessions, but mostly because I really wanted more than just twenty bucks for the whole night.



So, I followed the drizzled path left for me to chase around the corner ahead, through the hallway, and then through the side entrance of the kitchen area, where I glanced up to see Chubs feasting on the cheese blocks left for him by the far counter, his trail completely surrounding where he now sat.

"Okay," I muttered out as I slowed down to tiptoe up to his back side. I glanced up to the countertop ahead for a split second, and then leaned forward to snatch an empty, clear tall glass from it before crouching down beside the dog. I aimed the open end of the glass at the area below his tail and, after that, snapped my free hand out to grab him from underneath his stomach.

Of course, though, that plan failed, and Chubs spun around to race away from my grip once more.

"Chubs!" I shouted, hurrying right after him, holding the cup out to at least *try* to catch some of the dribblings coming off of his hind end. "Stop it! Halt! Cease! Desist!"

"Chubs!" I heard Bri screech out from somewhere else while I continued to chase the dog with my hand outstretched and my back hunched over.

And then, after another moment, Bri leaped out in front of both me and him and snatched him up from his sides in her hands. I froze, then, and straightened my back to see her hold him as far away from her body as possible.

"Got him!" she exclaimed, now glancing up at me. "He's a slippery one."

I nodded at her, blank-faced, and then held out the glass underneath his dripping bottom.

"Sure is," I uttered, staring at the clear tumbler as its base very slowly became tinted with deep brown fluid.

"Here, take him," Bri began to me. "And I'll go get his diaper."

Before I could even start to utter a response, though, she thrust the leaking dog away from the glass I held and into my arms.

"Oh," I grunted out as I wrapped my elbows around his back after Bri let him go and before he slid to the ground below. I glanced up as Bri turned to jog out of the room, and then decided to steadily lower myself to my knees and place the stained glass atop the carpet, afterward grasping Chubs' sides with my hands and pushing him away from me just as she had, all the while aiming his liquid feces above the cup below.

And then, as nothing but the sound of a Taco Bell's Crunchwrap Supreme commercial from the slightly distant TV filled the air around us, I had nowhere else to stare except into Chubs' deep brown and partly cloudy eyes.

"You know," I began toward him. "I used to have a dog. Her name was Princess Buttercup."

Chubs did nothing in response but blankly blink at me and continue to drip into the glass.

"But my dad accidentally ran over her when I was nine," I went on.

And then, abruptly, a warm stream of dark yellow liquid coming from the direction of Chubs' lower abdomen began to splash me... on my nose and mouth.

"Ugh!" I shouted out, immediately turning my head to the side and tossing the dog down to the floor. I then shot up to stand, pulled my already waste-stained heather gray sweater away from my black tank top undershirt and popped it over my face, afterward using it to rub all of the dog's urine off of my nose and cheeks.

"Got it!" I could hear Bri yell from far away as I did so.

And then, somehow, as soon as I was finished and glanced up, I could see Bri walking up to me with Chubs in her arms, fully diapered and all. She stopped, though, when she saw that my partially pee-soaked sweater was in my hands and not over my body, and then smiled.

"Did he pee on you, too?" she giggled out.

I smiled a little back and nodded as I stepped over to the coat rack by the front door nearby to hang the soiled shirt up on a peg next to my own brown peacoat.

"Don't worry, though," I stated as I turned back to her. "It's not the first time I've been bluntly sprayed in the face with fresh urine."

Bri erupted into a fit of laughter and bent over as she put Chubs back on the floor.

"You're a weird babysitter," she commented, now collapsing to sit on the ground as I stepped up in front of her. "But you're funny, too."

"Well," I replied, raising my hands to my hips as I looked down at her. "I'll take any compliment I can get, so thank you."

She gazed up at me and paused for a moment.

"Here, I'll help you clean the floor," she declared, now stepping once more directly in front of me. "I want mom to let you come back again."

"Oh," I said, moving aside as she pushed her way into the kitchen beside us. "Thanks, there, Bri."

I watched her walk up to and sift through a low-level drawer, then spin around with two green matted hand towels and a gray Walmart bag.

"Yeah," she went on, now making her way up to a tall cabinet and stretching her hand as high as she could out to it, though her arm span wasn't quite enough.

When I noticed her struggle, I stepped over to her side and opened it for her.

"The spray bottle," she said, stepping back to point up into the cabinet before I proceeded to take down a white and blue 'Ultimate Pet Stain Remover' bottle and hand it to her. "Thanks."

She took it and spun around, then stepped back around to the living room area; I followed as she spoke up once more.

"My mom got rid of the first nanny because she said she 'licked poles too much'. I don't why she would wanna do *that*, though."

I raised my eyebrows as Bri knelt down beside one pile of dog poo, and then decided to pick up the growling lion from the floor and put it back in place before proceeding to crouch down beside her.

"Oh, yeah?" I questioned. "I don't, either."

"Yeah," Bri answered, taking one towel and handing the other to me before spraying the affected carpet area very strenuously with the bottle she held onto. "And that was right before my dad left, too. I think he was upset about the nanny leaving, though, too; she was really nice."

"Oh?" I inquired as she began to scrub away at the flooring.

"Yeah," she continued. "And then mom yelled at him when he left, 'You had *better* leave... and take Jenny with you!' " She ceased scrubbing and glanced over at me. "Jenny was the nanny's name."

I nodded quietly at her, and then began to scrub the floor alongside her once she proceeded to yet again.

"Mom was real upset about it," Bri commented, right before she shuffled to the right a bit with the bottle and plastic bag, following the trail of droppings. "And I've only ever seen dad on FaceTime since he moved away." She squirted the carpet and began to rub areas farther away from me. "I don't know why licking the poles was that big of a deal, though."

I kept silent and crawled around her side, now taking the bottle and spraying a few different areas of my own as another commercial, this one advertising some seafood restaurant in Las Vegas, filled the background with noise.

"But my new nanny is okay," Bri said with a sigh. "I just liked Jenny more. She wasn't so old and boring like Pat is." She stopped again, and shot a look over my way. "Pat's the *new* nanny, and she's older than my *grandma*." I smiled at her, and then turned back to the carpet. "And I didn't think anyone could be older than grandma, but she's as old as a turkey without legs!"

I squinted over at her, and then she looked back.

"I meant *eggs*," she giggled out.

I laughed back, though I still didn't quite catch the eight year old's analogy.

Bri chuckled some more, and then stood to walk around me, plopping back down at the corner of the living room and hallway to the kitchen, about the midpoint of Chubs' once left legacy.

"I kind of wish you could be my nanny, though," she claimed.

I paused in place for a second before responding.

"Oh, yeah?" I asked. "But... you've only known me for, like, twenty minutes."

"Yeah, but," Bri countered, continuing to scrub as I glanced over to her. "You're kind of like Jenny... *and* you're not old." She stopped to look back at me. "You don't lick poles, do you?"

I laughed a little.

"I don't think so," I answered.

"Well, great!" Bri enthused, throwing her hands above her head. "Then maybe mom will like you, too!"

I smiled just as the television transitioned to a momentary silence. Bri then turned away and followed the stain trail farther into the hallway, pushing gradually out of my range of sight. I twisted back to toward the TV myself, though, when it began to sound off a weird alarm-like noise and flicker to a picture of a young man in a dark suit sitting at a wooden desk with a stack of blank white papers.

"This just in," he began to yell out. "It's time for some real *sick news*!"

"Oh, wait!" I heard Bri scream out, right before I turned to see her scamper back into the room and plow down to sit on the floor beside my right side. "I can't miss this!"

I looked from her to the TV set as a bright red graphic that read 'CKK Updates!!!' flashed across the screen for a second.

"First bit of sick news," the man at the desk continued as the words in front of him disappeared. "It seems that Brad Pitt just got majorly *dissed*!" He paused to let the sound of an automated crowd booing pass through the speakers. "Yes, it seems that a group of misfits in raccoon costumes showed up at the celeb's house yesterday with signs that read things like, 'You don't impress us much' and 'Shania was right about you'." He stopped to let the screen flip to a photo of just what he described- a group of individuals dressed in full-gear raccoon costumes in the middle of a street, holding signs

reading the same phrases he spoke of. "Could the protestors' big digs be about the actor's recent altercations with wife Angelina or the dick role he played in his 1990s flick *Fight Club*? The group gave no reasons for motivation, so those are just a few options from our list." The camera returned to where the speaking man sat. "Up next in our sick news, though... *Vicks got sued!*" He paused for another automated crowd sound, this time a unanimous gasp, to be heard. "That's right, our favorite brand of vapor rub is under fire after a woman in India claimed she bought and brought home a package of DayQuil pills only to open them and find, wait for this..." He paused dramatically with his hands spread out atop the desktop. "The box was full of *rat poison!*" He stopped for yet another gasp. "No pictures can be found for proof, so... is this bitch's medicine cabinet full of *bullshit* or actual *arsenic*?" He stopped for the robotic crowd's laughter. "Either way, we'll be sure to bring you more sick news when we get more of it!"

The same 'CKK Updates!!!' graphic flashed in front of him, and then I decided to turn away from the television.

"Does your mom let you watch this?" I abruptly question of Bri, who was sitting with her hands around her ankles and chin tucked into her knees beside me. "Not that *I* actually care or anything, though, just... wondering."

"Yeah!" she shouted, throwing her legs down in front of herself. "She's the one that showed it to me!"

"Oh," I spluttered out. "She... *did*, huh?"

I glanced back at the TV screen as it changed to a picture of another young man pouring out of box of what looked a lot like penis-shaped multicolored gummies all over his tilted-back head.

"*Huh...*" I repeated, right before looking down at the towel thrown down in front of me, grabbing it, and rising to stand. "Well..."

"We should play a game!" Bri yelled, jumping up even faster in front of me with the gray plastic bag she still had in-hand, her own dirtied towel already thrown in it.

"Oh, well, okay," I answered as I reached out to gently take the bag from her.

"I'll go get one; hang on!" she went on, right before spinning around and taking off down the side corridor by the TV.

I shrugged, just to myself, and then turned to snatch up the abandoned spray bottle by my feet. After that, I continued down the opposite hallway to the kitchen, saw the end of Chubs' trail on the dark tiled floor, knelt down, finished soaking up the last of it, then threw my towel in the bag with Bri's and returned the spritz bottle where it belonged. I turned toward the sink once I was done and glanced from the bag of used dish towels to the sink, back to the bag, to the sink, again, and then to the garbage can.

"Eh," I grumbled, now stepping into the direction of the tall trash bin. "No one will notice..."

I proceeded to lift the can's lid and dispose of the bag and its inner contents deep inside. Afterward, I dropped the top back down and stepped my way back into the living room as Bri came rushing in with a large, thin white and pink game board box.

"My mom made this game," she proclaimed as she slammed the box down on the carpet by the coffee table, snatched up the television remote, and, thankfully, turned the TV off. "And she tried to sell it to her company-business..." She paused to plop down

and cross her legs in front of the box as I stepped around to the other side. "But they told her they didn't like it, and then they fired her."

I raised my eyebrows as I sat down across from Bri and read the title on top of the box.

*'The Real Lil' Housewives.'*

"And they, um," I began, glancing up at Bri. "*Fired* your mom for this game?"

"Well," Bri started back. "She said she just got 'laid-off', but my friend Hannah told me that's just the *nice* way of saying fired."

I nodded as she reached to take the top of the box off.

"You've got smart friends," I commented.

"Yeah," Bri remarked as she threw the box lid over her shoulder and yanked the folded pink game board from inside the container left behind. "So, which lady do you wanna be?"

She laid the board down next to the box, and I observed the hand-painted palm trees and sunset scenes that surrounded the circular board walking spaces all over it before responding.

"Well, just whoever looks like me, I guess," I said, turning to look down into the box full of square, pink cards and little punch-out pictures of women's full body shots. "Or NeNe Leakes, if that's even an option."

"Oh, here," Bri shot out as she snatched up one of the little cutouts and handed it over to me. I took it as she shoved up to my nose, and then brought it out a bit to see that it was, in fact, actually a little cardboard cutout of Oprah Winfrey in a red dress and black pumps.

"Um, Bri," I started. "This is *Oprah*."

"No it's not," she objected, and then reached out to flip the little cutout over in my hands. "Look."

I stared at the back of the piece of cardboard and read the hand-scribbled title 'housewife #3 NeNe' engraved on it.

I looked back up at Bri as she leaned back and returned to organizing the cards in the box placed between us, then silently nodded and dropped my hand to my lap.

But there's no denying it was definitely Oprah.

Bri rummaged through the contents of the box a little more, and then pulled out a miniature cutout of her own. I read the back of it, which said 'housewife #1 Bethenny Frankel', and then scanned the frontside of it after she picked up a white standing clip, slipped it onto the bottom of the cardboard, and flipped it around to set down on the game board.

It was a cutout of Kristen Stewart actually holding a copy of the novel she famously helped make into a million-dollar franchise film, *Twilight*.

I blew out a tiny breath and turned back to look at Bri as she held a white clip out to me. I took it, quietly placed it on the bottom of my own Oprah cutout, and then stood my character on the board next to hers, right below the circle that had 'START' scribbled into it with sharpie.

"Oldest player reads first," Bri declared, picking up one solitary pink card to hand over to me. "All you do is read it and let me answer, and then tell me what it says to do."

"Okay," I agreed, now taking the card and flipping it to the non-blank side, where a very lengthy question and set of five A-B-C style answers were typed. "Wow..."

I raised my eyebrows as I looked the card over a second more, and then cleared my throat to begin reading what it said.

"Kate has just come to you saying that Laurie told Crissy and Megan that you told her that you think your husband's having an affair with Trina, but Trina came to you yesterday saying that she has a really great sex life with her own husband and that you shouldn't worry about her, but Kate has been acting really weird at your tea parties lately and now you think she might just be telling you that to get on your good side when she's really the one doing your husband, and Laurie just told you last weekend that Megan was cheating on her own husband with Crissy's husband, so she could be trying to do the same thing. Now who do you trust? Who are you sure isn't banging your husband in her spare time?"

I took a deep breath and flickered my eyes from the card, to an extremely engaged Bri, back to the card.

"A: Kate, B: Laurie, C: Crissy, D: Megan, or E: Trina."

I stopped my eyes at the bottom of the card, where the final instructions awaited, as Bri answered.

"Um..." she began, very thoughtfully. "I'd probably trust... Megan. Am I right?"

I kept my eyes down on the card, and then read on.

"No matter your answer, your husband is a filthy, dirty scumbag and is actually cheating on you with every other girl on the block, so move back three spaces."

"Awe," Bri whined as I glanced up at her and tossed the card down to the floor. "But I'm already at the start!"

"Well, then you had nothing to lose, I guess," I said.

"Okay..." she went on, now picking up a new card from the box. "Your turn, now..."

I pursed my lips and leaned back as she started to read it.

"Everyone knows Sandy is a nasty, two-faced slut and that she needs to be put in her place. Do you want to tell her this to her face, tell it to someone else, or just do nothing about it?"

I answered after she glanced back up at me.

"I'll tell her to her face," I stated.

Bri looked back down and studied the bottom of the card for a second.

"If you said 'tell her to both of her nasty whore faces', then congrats! You managed to get in a fist fight with her on the patio and broke one of her noses, move forward five places!"

I stared at Bri as she excitedly threw the card over her shoulder and gazed back at me.

"Um, okay," I muttered out, now reaching out to moved my mini Oprah figure up five bubbles.

"Your mom really made this game for her... company, though?" I questioned as I leaned back once more. "What is her... *job*, exactly?"

"Was," Bri immediately corrected. "She was someone who designed new toys and stuff. But now she just works at the bank."

I paused for a second.

"During a second shift... on a Sunday?" I inquired, squinting at her a bit.

Bri shrugged, and then returned her attention to the paper-filled box on the floor.

"Okay," I whispered, raising my eyebrows a tad.

I won't judge or jump to conclusions, though.

Maybe.

"Here," Bri ordered, handing me another pink card. "My turn!"

I looked down at the small, bold print font on the front of the paper, and then proceeded to read it.

"Angela thinks that you're illiterate and is spreading rumors that you dropped out of school after 4th grade to Hillary and Autumn. Prove to her that you're not by spelling the word *acid* aloud."

I tilted my head to the side and looked back up at Bri, who was intently leaning inward.

"That's easy enough, right?" I commented.

Bri delayed herself with a few blinks before nodding.

"Yeah," she said, now leaning back a bit and glancing to the side. "Okay..."

She paused for a long moment, so I decided to pipe up once more.

"I mean," I started. "You can just sound it out. And... here, I'll give you a hint- it starts with *a*."

"Okay," she said, now looking back at me and lowering her brows in deep focus.

"A..." She paused, again. "S... S... E... D!"

I cocked my head to the other side.

A-s-s-e-d.

I nodded.

"You know... good... good job, Bri..." I began before looking back to the card. "You... spelled it right! Move ahead two spaces!"

"Yay!" Bri shouted, throwing her arms over her head. "My mom always says you can't always trust autocorrect, so she teaches me how to do spelling myself... and now I'm so good at it!"

I smiled at her as I threw the card over my right shoulder.

"Yeah?" I enthused back. "Well, you sure are!"

Bri moved her character two bubbles forward, and then turned back to me with a new card.

"Okay, so..." she started before focusing her attention onto it. "Now... you have two daughters, and one of them is friends with a snobby bitch named Vivienne." She stopped to look up at me. "Oh my gosh- I have a friend named that!"

I raised my brows at her.

"Oh, you... *do*, huh?" I skepticized.

"Yeah!" Bri exclaimed. "Only, she's not a snobby bitch. She's really nice. Anyway..." She looked back down at front of the card. "Vivienne tried to steal your daughter's favorite *Nintendogs* video game..." She stopped again to glance up at me. "My friend Vivienne tried to do that to *me* once! Isn't that so weird?"

I raised my relaxed eyebrows once more, and then nodded my head slightly.

"Yeah, that's... *really* weird..." I mumbled.

"Only, *my* Vivienne gave it back to me a few months later and told me she was just borrowing it for a bit," Bri stated, and then both shrugged and returned her eyes to the card. "She tried to steal your daughter's favorite *Nintendogs* video game a few months ago, but she eventually got it back and didn't see how Vivienne was only setting her up so she should could steal more of her video games later on. Now, your daughter wants

to invite Vivienne to her upcoming slumber party, but you think that it could be a bad idea. Do you A: tell your daughter that Vivienne is snotty bitch-face and that she's not allowed to come, B: let Vivienne come to the party but watch closely over her the whole time, or C: just let Vivienne come and do whatever the hell she wants?"

I stared at Bri as she looked up at me.

"Well..." I started. "What would *your* mom do?"

Bri pursed her lips and cocked her head to one side.

"Hm..." she contemplated. "Well, my mom usually doesn't let me have parties, so..." She shrugged, again. "I don't really know."

I nodded.

"Well, then... I'll pick C, I guess," I said.

Bri looked down to read the rest of the card.

"It doesn't matter which answer you pick; they're all wrong. You're daughter isn't allowed to have slumber parties! Move back one space."

"Ah," I muttered, right before twisting toward the board and moving my piece back a bubble. "Should have seen that one coming..."

As soon as I placed Oprah in her rightful place, though, the strangest thing started to occur.

*The whole room started to physically shake.*

I threw my hands underneath myself and scanned the walls around us, seeing all of the knickknacks and such on the walls begin to tremble; it wasn't terrible and fierce enough to probably keep someone from standing, but... it was still enough to definitely take notice of.

"Oh, God, what's happening?" I yelled out before throwing my gaze back at Bri.

"Is... Is this an earthquake or something? I... I've never been in one of those..." I looked around hurriedly, again, as the floor continued to quake. "Oh, wow... but this isn't that bad, though, I guess..." I turned back to Bri, who was oddly silent in that moment, and then saw that she was staring straight past my head, unblinking, with wide eyes and a partially opened mouth. "*Bri?*"

I followed her eyes to the back wall, where nothing looked out of the ordinary, other than the trembling picture family picture frames that were now slowing their wavering a bit.

"They're coming," I heard her state, right before I snapped my head back at her.

She continued to glare ahead.

"*Who?*" I blurted out. "Who's coming?"

"T-T-T-T-T," she stuttered out, right before she abruptly shot up to a stand and screamed out in terror.

"What!" I screeched, jumping up beside her and following her eyes once again toward nothing.

The shaking of the room slowed to a stop as she bolted around me and dashed toward the kitchen.

"What!" I screamed, again, now starting to chase after her. "What's happening?"

And then, before Bri even reached the side of the dining room table ahead, she slid and collapsed on the slick floor underneath her swift legs.

"Bri!" I yelled, sliding myself down to her side as she landed on her back. "Are-Are you okay?"



I reached out to touch her arm, but, before I could, *her* entire body began to shake on top of the floor, her beady eyes staring straight at the ceiling the entire time.

"Oh my God!" I screamed, yanking my hand back from her. "Wh-What's happening! What do I do!"

I threw my hands behind my head and watched as her body continued to convulse, preventing her from any chance to respond.

"Bri!" I screeched out.

I tossed my hands down to hover over her abdomen, but didn't touch her shaking hips.

"I should call someone," I muttered out, and then sprung up to my feet. I rushed toward the dining table ahead on my left, and then frantically searched for my phone, left last somewhere in the area.

"Where is it!" I panicked once it began clear that it wasn't sitting anywhere on top of the cleared tabletop. "Ugh..."

I turned to the kitchen area, and then proceeded to check the top of every counter. However, I soon realized that it wasn't anywhere around there, either, so I started to rush back into the living room.

"Hang in there, Bri!" I yelled as I passed by her twitching form once more.

When I got to the den area, then, I scanned everything from the fake fireplace to the collection of miniature electric guitars and lion figurines before concluding that the cellular device was not *there*, either.

"Oh, wait," I spat out, then spun around and rushed back out to the dining room, passing Bri yet again. I slid up to the side of the coat rack by the front door and began to check the pockets on my dirty old peacoat.

It wasn't there, either, though, of course.

"Damn it," I cursed, stepping back and bringing my hands up to my waist. "Wait..."

I slid one hand to my back right jean pocket.

And there I felt the cracked phone screen resting peacefully.

"Yeah, of course," I muttered, now whipping it out, hitting the home button on its bottom frame, and turning back around to Bri.

"Okay, Bri, I... I'm gonna call someone for help, okay?" I began, and then peered up to where she was laying.

*Was.*

"Oh my God," I uttered, rushing up to the empty floor area where she once convulsed. I glanced up, then, and yelled out for her. "Bri!"

Suddenly, I heard a loud bang pipe up from the area of the coat rack behind me. Instinctively, I screamed out, and then spun back to see Bri standing beside the coats, her hands thrown out to her sides, her whole body pressed tightly against the glass of the front door.

"B-Bri?" I repeated, a tad softer, now approaching her backside.

She stepped back and spun toward me, her eyes narrowed and her expression tight.

"They're coming," she stated.

"Who?" I shot right back. "*Who's* coming, Bri? What's going on!"

She paused before quietly replying.

"The grays," she said.

I looked both to her left and her right, and then returned my eyes to her.

"The gr... grays? Gray..." I started. "Grays... gray..." I squinted. "*Grayson?*"

She shook her head.

"No," she answered. "The *aliens*."

I searched her face as it turned to a sense of freight.

"The gray... aliens," I began. "*Aliens*... Um... You know, Bri, you just had quite a... *seizure*... I think... and, uh, maybe you should just lay down or something, and I'll-"

"No, Emma!" she shouted, jumping forward and grabbing at my upper arms. "You have to get rid of them! *Please!*"

I widened my eyes as I was forced to stare into hers.

"Um..." I started. "Get rid of... the... aliens..." I paused, and then nodded. "Okay..."

I looked up as she released my from her grasp and stepped to the side. I, myself, took one measly step forward, and then glanced down at the cell still residing in my right hand.

"Well..." I mumbled. "Maybe..."

I looked up at the glass door ahead.

"Maybe..." I continued, and then stepped up to it. I grasped the door's handle with my free hand, and then looked back at Bri. "Maybe *ET* just wants to..." I held my cell out into her direction. "*Phone home*."

I turned back to the door and pulled it open, allowing a strong burst of snowy wind to blast my face under the darkening evening sky. I glanced from my phone to the cold, outside world, though, and then shut the door and twisted back to Bri.

"Or," I picked back up. "Maybe he just wants the *home phone*." I stepped forward, and then looked from the dining room table to the edge of the kitchen area. "Do you guys... *have* one of those?"

I looked back at Bri, who was standing still and silent, just as she began to softly shake her head.

"Figures," I grumbled, and then scanned the entirety of the surrounding rooms once again.

"Or..." I went on, after a moment or two, returning my eyes to Bri. "You have an iPad, so maybe we could... you know, offer that, and..." I paused. "They could all watch *Grey's Anatomy* on Hulu."

Bri shook her head, again, with a glare.

"Well, then," I started once more. "Maybe..."

And, just then, the house lights all around the two of began to flicker.

"Uh..." I mumbled, staring up at the one above my head as its bulb blinked furiously.

"We gotta hide!" Bri screeched out.

I dropped my head back to her as she rushed by my side and into the kitchen on my right.

"Emma, come on!" she yelled as she sped past the fridge and down the hall beyond it.

And, at the exact same moment, the light bulb in the open socket above me permanently flickered off, then abruptly cracked and popped, sending a few shards of its glass covering out on the floor around me.

I let out a quick, high-pitched shriek and threw my hands over my head before spinning to the right and proceeding to rush after her.

"Hurry, Emma!" I heard her yell as I hurried past the fridge and into the hall, and then turned down the corridor to see her jump past an open door at the end, the area right before the walls turned to mesh into the side of the living room. I chased after her, and then scampered into the room behind her right before slammed the door shut.

I glanced around in the darkness, then decided to flicker my phone on for light and noted that we were both in a very small, but highly decorated, bathroom.

I put my hand over my chest and steadied my breaths before turning back to Bri with my light.

"We forgot Chubs!" she yelled at me.

"Oh," I began to reply. "Well, maybe he'll be okay out there..."

"No!" Bri whined. "They could take him!"

She threw her head into her hands and turned away from me, then let out a tiny whimper of a cry.

I stared at the back of her head a minute, and then sighed a tad.

"Okay, I'll..." I started. "I'll go get him..."

"Oh, thank you, Emma!" Bri praised, spinning around to hug my waist.

"Yeah, yeah," I mumbled, placing my phone down on the counter by the sink and stepping up to the door as she released me. I then opened it cautiously, peeked out into the silent, vacant hallway, and made the decision to venture into it once more.

"Find him fast!" Bri added, right before I turned to the right and made my way toward the living room.

"I'll try," I whispered, now entering the new area by the edge of one of the sofas. I looked down to the game board and box we had left in the middle of the floor, then over to the shelves of collectables that had all been either tipped over or pushed down to the floor below from the quaking, and, after all of that, to the right, where a small, white, and pretty much ripped up diaper sat, in front of the next hallway. I stepped up beside it, and then saw that a trail of brown/green drippings on the white carpet led away from it and to the edge of the room at the very end of the hall.

"Oh, of course," I groused as I followed the path to the doorway ahead, and then peered into the room beyond it, which was pretty enormous and full of two white dressers, two white nightstands, and one large king-sized bed with, get this, all white pillows and sheets.

And, what's even better, Chubs was sleeping on top of one of the pillows, the entire upper half of the bed around him *covered* with his diarrhea waste.

"No," I whined out. "No, no..." I stepped over to the side of the bed. "No, no, no..."

I glared down at the dog.

"*Chubs!*" I erupted, throwing my hands up to my forehead.

Just then, though, another fierce shake took the ground by force, causing me to actually *fall* to my knees.

"Ugh!" I yelled as I dropped, and then grabbed the edge of the bed in front of me to pull myself back up over the subtly trembling ground. After that, I snatched the dog up and held him out from my chest as I turned to rush back to the hall outside. I then sprinted all the way back to the bathroom as the whole house shook and flickered its remaining working lights to darkness.

"Emma!" Bri yelled out, just before I darted into the room where she still resided, shining my phone screen's light onto me as I entered.

"I got him, don't worry," I commented as the shaking ground slowed to a halt just as quickly as it had begun. "But Chubs has to go in the tub..."

I stepped over to the cream colored bathtub at the opposite end of the confinement area as Bri shinned the light my way and shut the door, and then set the dog down in the bottom of it.

"Ick," I muttered, now looking down at the spots where his diarrheal contaminants had splattered onto my waistline and below. I turned to the toilet area on the left and grabbed a handful of toilet paper to wipe them away to the best of my abilities as Bri piped up.

"Is he okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," I replied, throwing the wet napkins into the open toilet below. After that, I closed the toilet seat's lid and took a seat on top of it. "Question is, though..." I turned back to her. "Are *you*?"

Bri cocked her head to one side as my phone's light dimmed to darkness, and then spoke up as she pressed the home button and brought it to life once more.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

I stared at her for a moment.

"Well, um, I don't know..." I began. "You... kind of had a seizure, a panic attack, and a... few weird moments, so-"

"Sorry," Bri said, stopping to light up my phone yet again. "I do that a lot."

I paused and pursed my lips.

"Seizures, though? Really?" I questioned.

"Yeah," she answered, now stepping forward and sitting on the floor in front of my feet. "Ever since I was really little, my mom told me."

"Oh," I nodded. "She didn't tell *me*, though."

"She probably thought you already knew," Bri stated.

"Yeah," I started as Bri lit my phone once more. "Probably..." I stopped to reach my hand out to the cell. "Here."

Bri looked up at me, and then handed the device over. I took it and unlocked the screen, then turned on the camera flashlight, flipped it over, and set it down on the bathroom counter beside me, lighting up the whole room around us.

"So..." I decided to go on. "Uh, these *aliens*... Do they, like, visit often or something?"

"*Well*..." Bri began, elongating her final 'L' sound. "I'm not really sure. My friend Darren says the grays come every time there's an earthquake, and he told me they took him in his sleep once."

"*Oh*?"

"Yeah," Bri stressed. "He used to live in California, and he said they abducted him while he was asleep the same day an earthquake happened. They put him back before his mom could find out, though."

I nodded, though, personally, I wouldn't trust anyone who made a conscious decision to move from *California* to *Wisconsin*.

"And... how did he *know* they took him?" I asked.

Bri squinted at me for a moment.

"They told him," she answered, right before her eyes began to roll away from me. "Duh."

I searched her expression from the side for a second before speaking.

"Right..." I said, and then glanced toward the closed door. "Well, I think I should probably go clean or... make dinner, or..." I proceeded to stand. "Do something that won't exile me from babysitting ever again."

I stepped toward the door, but Bri reached up and grabbed my hand to stop me.

"No, Emma!" she yelled, jerking my attention back to her. "I don't want you to get abducted, too!"

I looked her over for a moment, seeing genuine concern in her eyes.

"Yeah, but," I replied. "*I'm* not from California, so-

"No!" she continued to whine out. "Just... stay with me for a *little* bit, okay?"

She pouted her bottom lip.

"Okay," I sighed, squatting down to sit beside her. "But if you mom's bedroom still looks like a men's public restroom by the time she gets home..."

Bri giggled at my comment, and then responded.

"She won't be home for a while," she said. "Sometimes, she even comes home so late that *she* looks like a boys' bathroom."

She laughed, again, as did I, and then looked down at her feet.

"Yeah, but," she slowed down to go on. "I kind of wish she didn't have to work so much... so I could see her more."

I leaned my back against the wall behind us and studied the side of her solemn features.

"Emma," she picked back up, now glancing back over at me. "Does *your* mom work a lot?"

I paused, and then looked down at my own feet as I stretched them out to touch the edge of the cabinet ahead.

"Well," I eventually began. "I wouldn't know, because I don't exactly *have* a mom."

Bri gave me a sideways look when I glanced back to her.

"But, then... how were you *born*?" she questioned.

I paused, again.

"I was a test tube experiment," I answered. "Done by the grays."

Bri's jaw nearly dropped out of its socket.

"*Really*?" she raved, her eyes wide and lit with intrigue. "No wonder you're so weird!"

I smiled a tad.

"Well, I was... just kidding, actually, but..." I trailed off.

"Awe," she moaned.

I maintained my smile at her, and then looked away for a moment.

"No, my mom," I went on. "She... went away when I was really little."

I glanced back at Bri as she studied me slowly.

"Even younger than *me*?" she asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "She just... had some different priorities, I guess."

Well, that's the short, kid-friendly version of what really happened.

If you're wondering, though (and I'm sure you are now), my mother left my father and I when I was about just three years old, and I don't remember much of her, though I

have a clear picture drawn in my head of her from the pictures and stories my dad has shared with me over the years.

Long story short, however, her and my father fell in love at nineteen and had an impulsive, Vegas-style wedding (no prior engagement required) in a sketchy suburb of Milwaukee four months after they first met at a Spice Girls concert in Canada, of all places in the universe. They were married for a grand total of five long weeks before my mom found out she was pregnant with yours truly and, apparently, the feeling of glowing pregnancy was too much for her to handle, so she attempted to gouge her eyes out with plastic spoons on a few occasions during the first trimester, and, when that didn't work out for obvious reasons, she resorted to eating cotton balls for the next thirteen weeks, and then, when that didn't kill her, she used a rusted box cutter to slice off the top half of her right ear Vincent van Gogh-style. After that incident, my dad decided to check her into a mental institution until my birth in the October of 1999.

Once I was born, she seemed to completely change her mindset and ways in order to take care of me at home for the next three years until, one day, literally, she woke up, walked up to my dad, handed me over, said to him, 'this isn't my style anymore. I need a change of pace.', and then left the house in her '97 Ford Contour, never to return again.

Where she went or exactly why, I haven't got a clue, nor does my father. And, technically, they're still married, and she's still my mom, but it's unclear whether she's even still alive or not.

But, no, I don't actually *have* a mother as of right now in my life.

"But I live with my dad now, though," I continued.

"Oh," Bri nodded. "So, we're like opposites kind of..." She stopped for a moment as she stared at the door behind my head, and then let out a tiny gasp and looked back at me.

I glanced behind me for a second, thinking there was some creature lurking in front of the doorway, but there wasn't, actually, so I looked back at her just as quickly.

"What if my mom and your dad got together... and then we became sisters!" she went on to exclaim.

"Oh," I blurted out. "That would be, um..." I studied her enthusiastic expression, and then forged a smile back. "Something to surely think about!"

"Yeah," Bri mumbled, looking down to her feet once more. "I wish I had a sister... or a brother." She glanced back to me. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

I shook my head.

"Nope," I began, and then gazed to the edge of the bathtub behind Bri. "Well..." I thought of Miranda eating my blood in her peanut butter for a short moment, but then quickly reminded myself that I did *not* eat hers, so there was no remote possibility that we were 'blood sisters' bonded by sacrifice or witchcraft practice or something of that nature.

"No," I finished, shaking my head at Bri yet again.

She took my word as she looked back to her toes.

We let a short silence fall before she piped up again.

"Do you have any games on your phone?" she asked, looking over at me.

"Yeah," I replied, leaning forward to snatch the device from the countertop. "I have..." I turned it over, unlocked it, and switched the flashlight mode off.

*"Oompalypics, the birds and the pees, turtles talking trash..."*

"What's the 'Oompalympics'?" Bri questioned.

I proceeded to open the game's app as I answered her.

"It's where you play as an Oompa Loompa in the Olympics."

A great time killer for World History Class.

Or those lengthy restroom visits after lunch.

"Oo!" Bri cooed, already reaching out to take my phone away. "I wanna play it!"

I released the phone to her, and then both sighed and let my head drop back to wall behind me.

"This is fun!" she went on to applaud as I peered over my shoulder at the phone in her hands, seeing her control an Oompa Loompa as it sprinted down a bright red race track.

"Yeah," I mumbled, now closing my eyes and relaxing my shoulders.

I then rested myself for... a few minutes, I think, as Bri continued to giggle at the game she was playing.

After a while, though, she poked my upper arm, and I stirred to reopen my eyes.

"Emma," she whispered.

I craned my neck to look at her.

"Huh?" I grumbled back.

She lowered the phone she held to the floor.

"I think there's someone out there," she muttered under her breath.

"What?" I questioned, right before I heard a small, but abrupt, *bang* pipe up from the kitchen area outside the bathroom.

I jumped under my skin at the sound, as did Bri, and then slowly turned to look down at the crack underneath the door beside us, where the tiniest sliver of light was peeping through.

About a second later, two small shadows passed by in the hall outside, the sound of quiet footsteps accompanying them.

"Uh oh," I commented after the sound of them grew farther away.

"Emma, I think it's one of *them!*" Bri loud-whispered into my ear.

I proceeded to stand in front of the closed doorway.

"I'll go check," I said back, now reaching for the door handle. Before I grabbed it, though, I scanned the area around for some sort of potential weapon... and then settled on snatching up a large honey lavender glass candle.

This was a job for Miss Congeniality.

I carefully creaked the door open in front of myself, and then poked my head out just enough to make sure there was no one else in the hallway, which there was not, and, after that, chose to step cautiously out of the bathroom and to the right a bit. I looked ahead to the next corridor, where I noticed a light had begun to flicker on inside the bedroom that Chubs' feces had completely destroyed, and then continued to slowly make my way all the way up to the edge of it. Once there, I turned to the side and pressed my back up against the wall beside the open doorframe, then took a slight deep breath.

Before I could fully release it, however, a tall, human-like figure hurried out of the room beside me, and, instinctively, I screamed out and pounced on it, candle in-hand and all.

Both the figure and I collapsed to the floor, and I noticed that it let out a very feminine shriek. I then rolled it over underneath me and pulled the glass container of hard wax behind my head.

But I stopped before I could bash the intruder's skull in.

Because, of course, it was Ms. Bodenhigger.

"What the hell!" she (rightfully) yelled out.

"Oh my God," I urged out, immediately pulling myself off of her and lowering the lavender candle to my side. "Ms. Bodenhigger, I-I'm so... so sorry, I..." I rambled off as I stood and she pulled her upper body up.

"Who... the hell are *you*?" she questioned, looking at me from one side.

I wrapped both hands around the candle in my grasp and paused for a moment.

"I'm... Emma Lenford," I answered. "Your... Bri's... babysitter..."

She stared at me another moment.

"Oh," she eventually accepted, now pulling herself up to stand in front of me. "Yeah, I forgot..." She brushed off her cream colored sweater and ran a hand through her curly dark hair. "My, uh, *clients* didn't need me this evening, so..." Her voice trailed away as she turned to the right and began to walk down the hall to the kitchen. "I see the dog must have been a handful..."

"Yes," I replied, now stepping after her. "I mean, uh, no, he was just... hard to keep track of a bit, but I'm sure he had fun, and so did Bri, I think, and-"

"Oh," she stopped me, turning back around to face me in the middle of the corridor. "How was Briana?"

I searched her face a second as she slid her hands up to her hips.

"She was, uh, good, yeah," I replied. "She, um, kind of had a seizure, though, so-"

"*Seizure*?" she interrogated.

"She..." I went on. "Said she gets those... a lot..."

Ms. Bodenhigger glared at me a moment more, and then at the wall a second, and then at me a few more.

"Um..." she began, and then raised an eyebrow. "You mean a *convulsion*?"

I paused.

"Sure..." I answered.

"Yeah," Ms. Bodenhigger continued, spinning around on her heels. "Sorry about that, I guess."

I watched as she made her way to the kitchen, now calling for Bri.

"*Briana!* I'm home!"

Bri rushed out of the bathroom and jumped in front of her mother, arms spread wide open.

"*Mommy!*" she shouted.

"Hey, baby girl," Ms. Bodenhigger greeted, hugging her for a moment before turning back to me.

"Um, *Amelia*," she spoke to me. "I'll give you some cash for your time."

"It's-" I began back, but she ignored me and walked into the kitchen before I fully finished.

"Emma..." I mumbled.

I looked down to Bri as she rushed after her mother, and then decided to follow less swiftly in her footsteps.



"Here," Ms. Bodenhigger said, holding two crisp one-dollar bills out to me as I stepped into the room; I took them as she went on. "I'll... get the rest to you later."

"That's okay," I responded. "Really."

"Emma's my new favorite babysitter, mom!" Bri butted in from beside us.

"Oh, really?" her mother questioned, looking from her to me. "That's... nice..."

She turned quickly away from me, and I nodded at her backside.

"I'll just... go, now," I muttered, and then strutted over to gather my coat, soiled top, and shoes.

"Oh, I'll get your phone!" Bri shouted, sprinting off to the bathroom.

Ms. Bodenhigger stepped up to the side of the front glass door nearby as I slipped my garments on, and Bri returned not too much later with my cell.

"Thanks," I said as I took it from her.

She nodded, and then ran back into the hall.

"Bye, Emma!" she yelled out, stomping her feet the whole way away.

"Oh," I shot out, watching her as she sprinted. "Bye, Bri!"

"Okay, see you later," Ms. Bodenhigger chimed in, now opening the door in front of me.

I started to step outside, but then stopped and looked back at her once more.

"You didn't happen to feel an earthquake earlier, did you?" I questioned of her.

She laughed for a short moment.

"No, honey," she replied. "This is *Wisconsin*. Earthquakes only happen in *Europe*."

She then grabbed the sleeve of my peacoat actually *pushed* me out into the cold darkness outside.

"Bye-bye now!" she yelled, right before she slammed the door shut behind me.

## Road Trip

Well, watching Briana Bodenhigger didn't go quite exactly as planned.

But, even if I'm not her mother's favorite... Bri *did* claim me to be her new favorite babysitter, so I must have done something right.

Either way, though, the sudden Wisconsin blizzard raged on through the night and, miraculously, God must have chosen to answer the prayers of every young person in every square mile of Talket County the very next Monday morning.

*Because school had been cancelled for the day.*

And, yes, I'll admit I slapped my mattress and screeched a tad too loudly in joy when I checked my messages about forty seconds after my alarm went off and stumbled upon the glorious text message from the local weather channel: All schools in the Talket County School System are closed for the entirety of Monday the 27th of March, 2017, causing my father to, once again, burst into my room with his favorite baseball bat once he had heard my screams.

I had to calm him down, though; he's been a little on-edge since he found out about how the whole school thing with Grayson, a boy who he assumed was safe enough for me to hang around with every other weekend, but sort of kind of wasn't who *either* of us thought he was, had gone down. Which, actually, is also why I decided to not inform him of any of the other incidents that have chosen to befall me the past few weeks beside that one; I'm kind of afraid he'll physically go into cardiac arrest.

Well, except for the thing with the crazy lady that kept calling me *Erica*... because he actually had to pick Stella and I up from the police station that afternoon. And he didn't come back from that one very easily, either.

Anyway, after I realized that I had the whole day to myself with absolutely nothing in the world to care about... I decided it was a good time to watch some good ol' fashioned TV marathons of classic sitcoms and eat nothing but blue frosting graham cracker sandwiches all the live long day.

And that's just what I did.

Until my dad left for an unexpected night shift at his place of business at 7 p.m. and I decided that, after hours upon hours of lounging on the sofa in my llama pajamas and... no underwear... I really needed a shower.

And that's where this particular story begins.

With me, naked, under the steaming hot water of the house's only shower head, belting out the classic theme song of *That 70s Show*.

"*Hanging out!*" I shouted, closing my eyes and wetting my medium brown hair under the pelting water drops. "*Down the street!*"

I spun around and stepped back so the water wasn't splashing my eyelids as I opened them.

"*The same old thing!*" I yelled, right before I purposely threw a handful of water over my face. "*We did last week!*"

I turned back to the front of the shower, now allowing the steam to hit my back yet again.

"*And not a thing to do...*" I paused to snatch up my super-sized white conditioner bottle from the shelf ahead, and then yanked it inward, making sure it was perfectly

positioned under my chin as I held the index finger of my free hand up to my ear, all for that special added effect. "*But talk to you!*"

I slapped the side of the bottle and spun around once more.

"We're all alright!" I went on, waving the conditioner in and out of the water as I did so. "We're all alright!"

I grabbed the bottle with both hands and held it up to my chin, again.

"*Da-da-da-da-da-da!*" I sang, and then threw my head back to finish. "Hello Wisconsin!"

I brought my head back to center and chuckled a tad as I turned around and set my conditioner bottle down.

And then I swore I heard some sort of light tapping sound come from the hallway outside.

I immediately froze and attempted to listen for more... but no other noise came.

Still, though, I pulled the shower curtain back the slightest bit, and then poked my eyes out from behind it to scan the bathroom as well as what I could see of the dim hall outside (since I was home alone, after all, and *had* figured it was pretty safe to leave the door open). However, I saw nothing, so I returned to my hygienic duties.

Right when I leaned my back against the fall of roaring water, however, I heard another soft tap from outside.

"Okay, really," I muttered out, now reaching for the edge of the curtain once more. I paused before opening it again, though, because I heard another strange sound follow the last two.

"*Emma...*" some low, moaning-sort-of voice mumbled out from a bit far away.

I froze up, my hand still on the plastic curtain.

"*Gr-Grandma?*" I grumbled out, only now beginning to turn toward where my hand rested.

And, FYI, my grandmother passed away ten years ago.

"*Emma...*" the voice repeated, though closer this time.

I heard no footsteps accompany this voice, though I suppose the sound of the rushing water from the shower head beside me could have drowned out them out, but I assumed there were none and that the voice had to be coming from some odd, unknown force.

I paused another moment with my hand still stuck to the curtain, and I couldn't bring myself to pull it back to peer outside again.

But, I guess I didn't have to, because, about five seconds later, it whipped completely back and open in front of me.

I screamed and turned to snatch up my jumbo conditioner bottle once more in such a hurry that I then slipped on the slick shower floor and fell right on my frontside, bringing down all my soap bottles and cans from the same shelf with me.

"*Emma...*" the voice said yet again, now much, *much* closer to me.

I snapped my head up to the side of the shower curtain and saw none other than Stella Anderson standing in the opening set before me.

"*Stella!*" I screeched out.

"Emma, is that you?" she questioned, staring at my bare backside.

"Yes, Stella!" I shouted. "What the hell are you doing!"

"Yay!" she screeched, throwing her hands out to her sides. "I *found* you!"

She then spun herself around, though she jabbed her side into the corner of the bathroom counter nearby before she could manage the whole three-sixty.

"Ow!" she yelled, afterward stumbling back and grabbing at her abdomen before she plopped down to the ground on her bottom.

"Ow!" she repeated in the moment that her butt slapped the bathroom tile, and then closed her eyes tightly and leaned forward until her forehead touched the floor between her loose Victoria's Secret jogger-covered legs.

I took her moment of wincing to jump up and snatch up the nearest towel to wrap around myself. As soon as covered myself and stepped out of the shower, though, her head popped right back up.

"Oh..." she began, her eyes suddenly widening up at me. "*M... G!*"

She shot back up to her feet and waddled her UGG-protected toes up to me, a mere two inches or so away.

"Emma..." she whispered, and then looked me over as she, oddly enough, stroked a hand over the side of my dirty old blue towel. "I love this new dress..." She whipped her eyes back up to mine. "Where did you even *get* it?"

I held in a chuckle.

"Stella," I began back. "You're... *kidding*, right?"

She kept her eyes locked onto mine.

"No," she answered.

I glanced down at where her hand still patted my side, and then pushed it away.

"Stella, I think-"

"Oh my God," she cut me off. "Emma, is *that* a *beach house!*"

I gazed back up at her right as she jumped past my side, and then turned to see her try to jump over the edge of the shower/tub behind me, trip, and then face-plant into the bottom, her legs rolling over her head as the water continued to rain down on top of her.

"Oh, boy," I muttered, and then stepped over to the edge to shut the shower water off.

"*The tide is high!*" she yelled out, crawling herself back up to her knees in the bottom of the tub. She threw her head back and looked up at me before continuing. "*But I'm holdin' on!*"

She then collapsed into a fit of giggles as I reached out to grab her arm and yank her out of the tub.

"I'm gonna be Emma's *number one!*" she went on to just *hilariously* sing as she stumbled onto the floor.

I had to pull her back from another fall before she stood back up, somewhat steadily, in front of me, still heartily laughing and all.

"Stella," I began, knotting the top of my towel around my chest before I grabbed her shoulders and forced her to face me. Once she ceased her laughter, then, I pierced my eyes into hers and went on. "*You're drunk.*"

She raised her eyebrows and dropped her jaw a bit.

"Wh-What?" she questioned.

"Or high," I continued. "I'm not exactly sure which because I'm not a drug expert or psychoanalyst or anything, but... if I had to put my money on it... I'd say you mistook your mom's special cocktail stash for the green tea K-cups in the family coffee maker."

"But, Emma," Stella started, shaking her head. "I don't even *like* coffee."

"Yeah, well," I said, before I trailed off for a moment. "Here, come with me."

I turned to the door and made my way out to the hall.

"Oo," she began, right before chasing after me. "Are we gonna watch *Mrs. Doubtfire*?"

I didn't even reply or look back; I just forged on to my room at the end of the corridor.

"Or *Jurassic Park*?" she asked, her pounding footsteps following close behind me.

"Or maybe *Gho-*"

And then she slid down and tumbled her face onto the hardwood floor, again, right next to my feet. I paused in my doorway to look down at the back of her blonde haired head for a second, and then just went on inside.

"Why do I keep doing that?" her voice muffled out, right before she pulled herself back up. "I don't even *like* falling!"

I stopped by the edge of my mint green-sheeted bed and turned back to her, raising my brows.

"Oo, Emma," Stella went on, now preoccupied with intriguingly scanning the small cramped area around us that was my bedroom. "Is this your *brother's* room?"

I crossed my arms over the loosening towel at my chest and turned to follow her as she stepped over to my sloppy white wooden dresser, clothes hanging out of each inch of its drawers.

"I don't *have* a brother," I grumbled behind her back. "Or a sister, actually, at least... I don't think so. Just me and my lonesome old father... and a dead dog buried in the backyard. A few neighborhood rats, too, I guess... and the termites in the walls."

Stella suddenly spun around and held a small, rubberized lizard keychain out between us, forcing me to step back a tad.

She stared at me for a few moments, and then squeezed the mini toy's sides, making a long red rubber tongue roll out of its mouth and tap me on my nose.

I moved my eyes from her to the keychain.

And then she keeled over in a fit of laughs.

"Oh my God!" she shouted, physically collapsing to her knees. "*Emmet*, you're so funny!"

She proceeded to roll over to her back and toss the toy across the room, hitting and knocking over a glass vase on my bedside stand.

"Ugh, Stella," I grouched as I rushed over to save it from rolling onto the floor.

I heard her gasp as I set it back in place.

"*Oh... M... G...*" she began, now scampering up to my side. "You have a *hamster*!"

She reached out to snatch up the broken black alarm clock box that sat beside the empty vase.

"He's so cute..." she commented.

However, before she could completely pick it up, I seized it right back and slammed it back down.

"Okay, Stella," I started, grabbing her upper arm and swinging her around to sit on the bed's edge behind me. "*Why* are you here?"

I took a step back and tightened the towel around my body.

She paused for a moment, sighed, and then glanced up at me as she brought her legs up to cross underneath herself.

"There's this, like, *guy*... waiting for me, I guess," she stated.

"A *guy*?" I questioned, leaning inward to her. "What *guy*?"

"Coo-wl yer radishes, Emma," Stella half-slurred out. "I'm gettin' to it..."

I watched as she rocked onto her back, and then pulled herself up once again.

"Emma, listen..." she went on, rolling her eyes back and forth as she spoke.

"*He's* gonna make *me*..." She stopped to throw her hands out to her sides, her fingers outspread. "A *supermodel*!"

She closed her eyes and forced a weak grin.

I paused for a moment and studied her slowly.

"Really..." I began. "Are you..." I tilted my head to one side. "*Sure* about... *that*?"

Stella shot her eyes opened and forcibly nodded.

"Uh, *yeah*, Emma," she huffed. "I'm gonna get, like... head and ass shots and everything." She rubbed her one eye, smearing eyeliner and mascara down her cheek at the same time. "I'm very professional."

"Oh, *yeah*?" I asked, leaning on my left hip. "And do you get a refund, too, if those ass shots don't exactly work out for you? I mean, I know your dad's got money in the bank and all, but..."

"Whoa, *whhh*-oa there," Stella butted in, throwing her head back on her neck and her hands up in 'stop' gestures. "Emma..." She glanced at me once more, her hands frozen in place. "I am fr-*eeeeee*-aking Stell-*uhhhhh* An-*drew*-son..." She transitioned to aiming her pointer fingers at her lap. "And if you don't think this here lil' tuchus can break a rat's back, then..." She trailed off for a long moment, staring blankly at the wall behind me. After a good amount of glaring at her obviously distracted and disoriented expression, I decided to open my mouth to speak, myself, but, just then, she turned back to me and finished what she had started. "You cl-*eeeeeeee*-rly aren't my best friend, Emma."

I nodded with my mouth still half-opened.

"Okay, a few things there, actually..." I began, shifting in place a bit. "One, your name is Stella *Anderson*, not *Andrewson*... second, I don't know what the hell that analogy is supposed to prove for your 'little tuchus'... and third... I think there's actually quite a few things that support the belief that I am not, in fact, your BFF." I paused. "So, um-"

Stella shot out a gasp and jumped up to a stand from the bed's edge, though she almost immediately lost her balance and tripped to her right, tumbling down to the floor below... yet again.

"Oops," she giggled out. "I did it again!"

I returned my arms to a cross and looked from her to the wall across the room with a slight eye roll.

"Hey, Emma," she continued to chuckle, now pulling herself to her knees by my feet. "'Member that?" She stopped to force a half-cough, half-laugh for a moment. "That was so-oooo fun!"

I raised my eyebrows as she stumbled up to her feet.

"Yeah, I guess," I replied. "If you think being the kidnapped subjects of a mentally unstable ninety year old woman for one dreary afternoon is a holler and a half, then

okay... but I don't think that's really much my speed, exactly, so no need to hoot and holler at me."

She continued to laugh.

"Oh, I love you, Emm-ie..." she stated, and then turned to plop face-down on top on the bed once more, her whole body outspread across it this time.

"Oh, and so..." she went on, rolling over to crane her neck toward me. "You can thank me now, please."

I glared at her.

"For what?" I questioned.

"Because," she began, right before she threw one arm up over her head. "I got *you* a modeling package, too!"

I narrowed my brows.

"Um..." I muttered. "I'm sorry; *what?*"

"I mean," she continued, and then pulled herself back up to her knees atop the bed sheets. "I know you don't exactly have the *nicest* fashion sense..." She held one hand out, palm-up. "Or the *greatest* ass features, like me..." She flipped over her other hand in a similar manner. "Or the best..." She trailed off in, I guess, deep thought like she had once before going on. "*Anything...*" She came down from her knees to sit cross-legged yet again. "But, Emma, you have what the profession calls a certain... *okay-ish* hairstyle and... *decent* nose..." She paused and stared me down for a second. "Well, after some minor plastic work, that is... and, honestly, some cheek fillers wouldn't hurt, either, or-"

I stopped her right there.

"Stella," I snapped, moving my hands into halt gestures. "You can stop now, okay, because..."

I trailed off as Stella leaned back a bit.

"But," she started, quietly. "I was talking about *butt* cheek... fillers..."

I rolled my eyes, again, and twisted away from her for a break of a moment.

"Okay, Stella, listen..." I began, calmly enough, before I glanced back toward her.

"You can *not* go getting any..." I paused to hold one hand of air quotes up to her. "'Modeling packages' from just any random guy you meet on the street... I mean, it was just this random guy telling you about all this junk, right? And... how did you meet him, exactly, anyhow?"

Stella flipped her hair over her face, and then blew a few of her long blonde strands up into suspension over her nose for a second, and then giggled as she fell back on her back, and then brushed them out of the way as she sat back up with a completely emotionless face.

"Okay, *Emma*, listen," she began back, dead-panned. "He's not just *some random guy*... I met him at the mall earlier this afternoon, and he's actually really cool, okay?" She nodded and looked away. "Yeah."

"But," I replied. "Wasn't the mall kind of, uh, *closed* today? With the blizzard and everything? And, actually, even if it weren't... why would you want to drive all the way there and back through all the snow and icy roads?"

"Emma," Stella countered, glaring back at me with an index finger upheld. "I said *listen*..." She stopped for an excessively long moment to clear her throat about seven and a half times. "There's never a bad time to visit the Luis Vuitton store."

I stopped her, again.

"There's no Luis Vuitton shop for at least 300 miles from this town," I said.

"Emma!" she screeched. "I said *listen!*"

I threw one hand up in defense and raised my eyebrows, then allowed her to continue with her story.

"Now, I ran into him in the parking lot... I think..." she trailed off for a moment. "I don't actually remember that part, I guess, but I *do* remember him giving me these, like, special little Pez candies! He said he makes them himself because they're hard to find or something, I guess, but, like, they're always at the check-out lines in Walmart, so... maybe he just goes to Target or something... Anyway, he gave me a few, and they were *rea-l-l-l-l-y, rrrrrr-ea-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-y, rrrrrrrrrrrr-eeeeeee-aaaaa-l-l-l-l-l-yyyyyyyyyy g-ooooooooo-d!*"

I widened my eyes at her sudden enthusiasm.

"They, uh, *were*... were they?" I mumbled out.

Stella stared at me for an uncomfortably long moment.

"They, uh, *yeah!*" she mocked me. "Damn, Emma, haven't you ever had a Pez before? You know... the little things that look like pills but come out of a Mickey Mouse dispenser? Only..." She stopped for a second. "These just came out of a little sandwich baggie..." Her eyes lit up once more. "That's probably why they're so good!"

"Oh, no..." I muttered.

She giggled loudly and threw her head back for a long period of time before returning her eyes to me to go on.

"I wanted more of them, but he said you can only have so many at a time or you'll get, like, high blood sugar or something. Or just *high*." She paused, and then laughed, again. "I'm just kidding!"

"I'm sure you are..." I whispered, and then stepped up to her side of the bed. "Here, Stella, why don't you just... lay down for a bit..."

I reached my hands out to touch her shoulders.

"But, Emma," she rejected, pushing me away already. "He's waiting for us... outside!"

I stepped back and paused.

"He... He's outside... *here?*" I interrogated.

"Well," Stella rolled her eyes. "*Duh.*"

"You brought him *here?*" I reiterated.

Stella nodded.

"Oh, great," I mumbled, and then spun around.

"How else are we both gonna become supermodels, Emma, huh!" Stella shouted at my backside.

I rushed forward to my dresser ahead and yanked the top drawer of it open.

"Shut up, Stella!" I yelled back.

I proceeded to rip a plain black bra and a pair of devil red undies that read 'can't touch this' on the back out, then slammed the drawer shut once more. Though, before I could proceed to the next one, Stella screamed at me yet again.

"Emma!"

I threw the garments to the floor, grabbed the top of my towel, and whipped myself around.

"*What!*" I half-screamed, half-grumbled.



Stella leapt from the bed and pointed at my head.

"There's a *spider* in your hair!" she screamed.

Instinctively, I let out a frightful yelp in reply and threw my hands up to grab at the damp wad of dark hair atop my scalp, dropping my dirty towel in the process, though I didn't care much about it right away and continued to rustle through my brown locks as violently as I could.

"Get it out!" I screeched.

Just then, however, Stella let out a rumbling chuckle, rushed forward, slapped her hand at my bare bottom, and then turned to sprint out to the hallway.

"Got'cha!" she shouted as she left the room.

I threw my head back up to center.

"Ugh!" I roared at her. "Stella!"

I turned my naked figure to watch her disappear down the hall to some other part of the house, the only trace of her left behind being her ridiculously annoying giggles forever etched in my ear drums.

After that, though, I turned and knelt down to snatch up my under garments once more, then began to put them on over my burning red skin.

"Emma!" I heard Stella shout from across the house. "I think he wants to come in now!"

I finished slipping both clothing pieces on, and then shot my head back to the hall.

"Do *not* let him in!" I shouted back.

I fell quiet to listen for her response, and then cursed to myself when I heard her stupid laugh once again.

"Damn it," I muttered, now rushing out of my room and into the corridor to the living area. "*Stella!*"

I ran through the den and the dining room to get to the front door area, continuing to shout at her the entire time.

"Don't let that creep in, Stella, or I swear to God!"

And then, once I reached the front room, I slid to a stop to witness Stella as she shut the door behind a tall skinny man with a Chicago Cubs cap and dark olive skin.

I froze as he turned to see me, fresh from the shower in my bra and panties.

"Oh, is this your friend, Miss Anderson?" he asked politely with a nod toward me.

"Oh, Emma!" Stella screeched, spreading her purple sweater-ed arms out as she ran over to me.

"This is her!" she giggled out as she wrapped me, sort of thankfully, into a close, tight hug.

"Why, hello, *Miss...*" he began, pausing and leaning forward afterward, probably expecting me to finish for him or something.

"Emma!" Stella yelled back to him, releasing me from her grip and stepping to my right side.

The man leaned back and slid his hands into his puffy black coat pockets.

"Oh, *Emma*," he smiled, eerily. "Nice to meet you."

I immediately grabbed Stella's arm and yanked her back over to me, then tossed her in front of myself and gave her a tight squeeze of a hug from behind with my arms around her shoulders; I could maybe mention that she continued to giggle the whole time.

"Yup," I started, throwing my head over one shoulder as I used her to shield my partially bare body. "Emma and Stella... it has a nice ring to it, kind of; it would make a good book or something someday." I then let out a forced, heavy chuckle of my own. "But, um, anyway... we really need to, uh-"

And, before I could even finish, the man stepped forward and leaned inward yet again.

"Would you like some candy, Emma?" he asked.

I raised my eyebrows, unconsciously, then shook my head.

"No, thank you, actually, I..." I responded. "I'm not *seven years old*, and I kind of... need to watch my calories."

He leaned back and smiled, again.

"Oh, I can tell *that*," he stated.

I don't think my eyebrows could have raised any higher.

"Um," I picked back up. "As I was saying, though, Stella and I need to... go grab our makeup and stuff."

Stella let out a small gasp and butted in.

"Can we go to Sephora instead?" she asked, not once looking back at me.

I jerked my hands tighter around her neck area.

"No, Stella," I jumped in to say before the man could speak. "Sephora is closed right now... and so is every other store in the county, actually, so-"

"Actually, I have plenty of makeup for you girls to use at *my* place," he cut me short.

"Oo!" Stella cooed, attempting now to step forward, out of my clutches. I quickly pulled her back in, however, and countered his offer.

"*Actually*," I began. "I have really sensitive skin, and I need to use my special foundation, so I should probably go get that."

Stella tried to step away from me, again.

"Well," she added on, now trying to brush my hands away from her shoulders. "I'll wait for you out in the car, then, Emma."

I grabbed at her collar bone once more and kept her from walking away.

"But, Stella," I spat out. "You hid it from me as a joke, remember?" I forged another small laugh and began to spin her around to face me for once. "Oh, yeah, it's so funny, but, uh... I *don't* know where you *put* it, *Stella*."

Stella stood, forced to stare at me as I held her shoulders still, and then scrunched up her face again.

"Oh my *God!*" she shouted, and then slapped my hands completely away. "I didn't take *any* of your shit, Emma!" She took a step back, shook her head, and then abruptly dropped her voice and began to sniffle. "Why would you even say something like that?"

I paused for a moment and watched as she brushed a sudden but genuine tear away from underneath one eye.

"Because... you..." I started to reply while she sniffed some more. "You didn't take it, exactly, you just... hid it... in my room somewhere, I think, and I'm sorry if I was mistaken, but I need to find it either way, so..." I stopped and reached out to gently grab at one of her dangling wrists. "If you could... just... come with me..."

"*No!*" she shrieked, throwing my hand back at me. "You don't trust me, Emma! And you... you..."

Her whines turned into soft cries as she threw her head into her hands.

"Sh," the man piped up from behind, stepping forward to place a hand on her shoulder; he afterward glanced up at me. "I think it's time for Miss Anderson to get some rest..."

He turned toward the door and spun her around.

"Wait," I blurted out, jumping up to her backside as he began to creak the door open, revealing the very windy, cold darkness to us all. "Stella, wait."

The man stepped outside and dragged her close behind.

"Stella, please," I spat, and then grabbed at the back of her free arm once more.

"Get off!" she yelled in response, brushing my hand away yet again as she stepped out into the lightly snowy night.

I halted at the door's edge as the man continued to pull her down the porch steps toward his shiny black Mercedes. I then watched when he stopped her a few feet by its side and left to open the driver's door.

I glanced down at my attire and bare feet, then grumbled and decided to jump into the cold after her.

"Ugh..." I mumbled, right before my frozen toes trotted up to Stella's side.

I reached out to wrap my arms around her, making sure one hand covered her blubbering mouth before I jerked her into the direction of the door.

"Shut up and just come with me," I whispered to her.

She yanked herself the opposite way and let out a small scream behind my protection.

"Stella, hush!" I muttered out, tugging her back into the right direction.

She groused out against me once more and grabbed at my hand, then attempted to force it away.

But you all know neither it nor I was going anywhere.

"Mm!" she continued to mutter, struggling to push me away.

"Sh!" I countered, now stumbling to the side, forced to look away from where the man still hunched over beside his car, doing God knows what.

And then Stella proceeded to kick my shins.

"Ow," I uttered, backing up a bit, but still keeping my grasp on her.

"Mm!"

"Stella," I went on to whisper as I pulled her back into me. "Just stop and-"

And *then* I felt a scratchy thick cloth flip itself over my neck and painfully pull me backward.

I immediately released Stella and grabbed at what I believe was a ripped, but durable, old wife beater as it choked me into submission.

"Ah!" Stella fully screamed out, now that she was able to, while I gargled and staggered backward with the cloth's grasp.

I felt the fabric of the creepy man's smooth puff coat press up against my backside, and then found my feet tripping on top of the snow as I was dragged a few more feet back. After that, I was forcibly whipped around to see, of course, the Mercedes' dark, open trunk area, before I was lifted from my heels completely and thrown actually *into* it.

The pressure on my throat was released, and I grabbed at the loosened wife beater as I attempted to roll from my stomach to my back atop the itchy car carpet. And then,

before I could move in any other way, I witnessed the man return with Stella, silently seized by her waistline, right before she was tossed right on top of me.

"Safe travels," he muttered out.

Stella actually let out a soft giggle as the trunk door was slammed down on top of us.

I however, surrendered to the silence and waited for the sound of the engine being ignited. After that, I blinked through the darkness and pushed Stella off of me.

"See what you did, Stella!" I rumbled, right before the car lurched forward and made me roll and tumble on top of her. "God damn it!"

I peeled my half naked body off of her as she laughed out loud... again.

"W-eeeeeee!" she enthused as the car bounced violently underneath where we were now forced to lay. "This is so fun!"

"Stella!" I scolded, now trying to blindly flip over to my hands and knees. At least, as well as I possibly could have. "I swear on my estranged mother's grave, I will *rip* your stupid, prissy blonde curls right out of their hair holes and-" I paused, abruptly, while my body was thrown back down to its side from the bumpiness of the road underneath the two of us. "Hire an occultist to curse every one of them before I donate it all to a wig charity!"

Stella let out a sound of 'awe' as I pulled myself onto my stomach once more.

"You'd really do that for me?" she cooed.

"Yeah," I shot back. "In fact, I can do the honors right now."

I threw one hand out to what I thought to be the top of her head and grabbed at a chunk of her hair through the black air surrounding us. I then yanked it inward and forced her to scream out.

"Owie!" she shrieked. "Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

I released her and replaced my hands underneath myself.

"Now give me your sweater or something," I ordered her. "It's too cold in here for beach attire."

"No!" she huffed back, and my eyes had adjusted to the dark enough that I could now see her cross her arms where she lay. "You're *mean!*"

"Yeah, well, when you're cramped in a ten-degree car trunk with, literally, not even the clothes on your back because some girl you don't even *like* dragged a pedophile disguised as a modeling agent to your house in the middle of a Wisconsin snow storm on a school night... you don't exactly feel in the mood to be *nice*," I rambled back to her. "Now, give me your damn sweater!"

Stella fell quiet, and then I heard that tiny snuffle of hers.

"You..." she nearly inaudibly mumbled. "Y-You... said... y-you... don't... I-I-I-like... me..."

I rolled my eyes, though I knew she couldn't see them.

"Stella, this is not the time," I said.

"B-B-B-B-But," she stuttered out. "Y-Y-Y-Y-You s-s-s-s-said..."

I picked up as she trailed off and pulled myself up to my knees, again.

"Please just give me your-"

I stopped, though, when we traveled over another heavy bump and I smashed my head into the ceiling of the trunk door.

"Ugh," I grumbled, and then fell down to my side another time.

I grabbed at the stabbing new wound for a second, then decided to glance back at Stella and continue a bit more kindly.

"Okay, Stella," I started. "I didn't mean that. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said it, okay? I mean... you're really not the *best* friend I've ever had... but, I don't *hate* you and you've never tried to kill anybody, other than me, so you're okay... okay?"

She fell silent for a long moment.

"Okay?" I repeated.

I watched her head turn toward me, and then listened for her response.

"Emma," she began. "I... I don't know where the... the frogs went..."

I narrowed my brows.

"*Frogs?*" I clarified.

I saw her nod her head a bit.

"They wouldn't kiss me," she declared. "They said I had stinky feet... but I can't help it!"

I paused for another lengthy moment in time.

"Um, well," I said. "Can I borrow your sweater, now?"

She looked from me to the ceiling, and then began to wiggle her fuzzy purple top over her head, leaving a black tank top underneath it. She then threw it over my face, and I graciously slipped it on over my head.

"Thank you," I muttered, now shimmying it snugly down to my waist.

"But, I mean, who wouldn't kiss *me?*" Stella questioned aloud.

Just then, the car slammed to a stop, and she rolled on top of me. She, of course, laughed out, and then decided to poke my nose with one finger.

"*Boop!*" she giggled.

When the car reeled forward once more, she rolled away, and I threw my elbows down to keep me from tumbling around, too.

"Okay," I whispered, once we reached a steady drifting speed. "Now, um..." I threw my warming, covered arms down to the left and pushed myself to my stomach.

"Hey, Emma," Stella chuckled out beside me. "I bet you're glad you're not on your period right now."

"Yeah, yeah," I grumbled, coming up to my knees once more.

"Or that you don't have diarrhea," she went on. "Or that you don't have to pee, 'cause these bumps are, like-"

Ironically enough, she was cut off when we drove over another dip in the road. After that, she let out a good laugh for a long second before stopping for another rough spot. Once that one passed, though, she fell quiet, then muttered out.

"Uh oh..." she said.

"What?" I urged, shooting my head toward her.

"I... um..." she began, still staring at the roof over us. "Wait, no, never mind."

"You better not have," I grumbled, and then looked over and around to all of the thin walls around us.

"But, now..." I went on, scooting forward on my knees, my chest sweeping the floor, to touch the interior side of the trunk in front of me. "We have *got* to get out of here."

I proceeded to make a fist and pound against the tough plastic separating us from the outside world.

"One time," Stella said as I knocked on the wall. "I had a brother."

I inched back a bit, and then gazed over at her.

"Had?"

"Yeah," she replied, interlocking her hands over her abdomen as she blinked at the black ceiling above us. "But then he ate a pigeon and went to prison." She stopped to giggle. "That's fun to say."

"Uh," I started back. "Is that *true*?"

"Yes," Stella answered, looking over at me. "He was in Scotland. But now he's in Kansas... and I can't remember why..."

I raised an eyebrow, then returned to look at the wall beside me, the one that connected to the rest of the vehicle.

"Oh, yeah, I remember," she picked back up as I banged on the next plastic covering. "He joined a band."

"And why did he have to go to Kansas for that?" I asked, spinning on my knees to get to the next section of siding.

"Because," she started. "It's legal to eat pigeons there."

I paused and glared over at her.

"Isn't it legal to eat pigeons *here*, too?" I asked.

She looked from me to the roof.

"Maybe," she said. "But the band's name is 'Country Blue Ass', too."

I stared at her for a second.

"Okay," I muttered, and then turned back to the paneling in front of me.

"And he always sends fake report cards to dad so he thinks he's still in school, but he dropped out, like, twenty years ago," Stella continued as I pounded the heel of my hand against the hard plastic in front of me. Once I stopped, I spun back toward her and threw my hands down to the roughly carpeted ground.

"*Twenty* years ago?" I questioned as I began to feel around on the floor for... I'm not sure what, but it seemed like the next step.

"No," Stella snapped back. "I said, like, *like*, Emma."

I ceased feeling up the carpet once I concluded it wasn't getting me anywhere.

"Um, okay," I muttered, and then fell back on my knees, hitting my head on the ceiling area in the process. "Ugh..."

I leaned forward once more before continuing to speak.

"Wait," I began, a bit abruptly. "Wasn't this in a movie once?" I glanced over at Stella. "With Halle Berry, remember? I can't remember what it was called." I paused and nodded. "The *Call*."

"Ooo, can we watch it now!" Stella cheered, now, for the first time, flipping over to her stomach, her arms flailing above her head the whole time. "Please, Emma!"

She proceeded to roll over another time, crashing into me and slapping one hand across my face.

"Ow, Stella, stop!" I scolded.

"But, Emma," she went on, now reaching out to pinch both of my cheeks. "*Pah-leeeeeeee-ase!*"

She shifted my head between the left and right while she grabbed at my face.

"Stop it!" I yelled, seizing her wrists.

She then attempted to sit completely up, but promptly rammed the top of her skull into the metal covered ceiling.

"Owie!" she screeched, immediately releasing me and flopping back down to her back.

And then, I have to admit, I let out a small bit of laughter.

"Oh my God," she muttered. "Emma, I can see *God!*"

I silenced myself and stared at her for a moment.

"You sure?" I questioned.

"He," she continued. "He's wearing a black hoodie... and he's black... and he has dreadlocks... and he... he's *smoking* something... but I don't think it's a cigarette, but..."

She trailed off, and then I drew a conclusion for her.

"Stella," I said. "That's Snoop Dogg."

She paused for a moment.

"Oh..." she whispered.

And, just then, the car flew over another bump, causing *me* to hit *my* head on the metal similarly to how Stella had.

"Agh," I grumbled, throwing myself partially down to my stomach as I grabbed at the back of my icy wet hair.

"Okay," I went on, breathing the stabbing pain away. "We... *really* need to get out of this death cab."

"Yes," was all Stella mumbled back.

"What did..." I began. "That girl do in the movie... when she was locked in that guy's trunk?"

I looked over at Stella as she looked at me.

"Ate cheesecake," she shot out.

I shook my head.

"No," I said. "She..." I gazed over at the corner by Stella's feet. "Kicked the lights out."

"Awe," she whined out. "I was close..."

"Okay, Stella," I ignored her and went on while I situated in place to face her boots. "Kick that corner right there by your feet- really hard."

"Ugh," she groaned. "*Why?*"

I snapped my gaze back to her.

"Because," I stated. "I kind of would like to get out of this speeding car before your new *friend* takes us back to his place and makes us into human dolls with buttons for eyeballs, *please*."

Stella rolled her eyes from me to the ceiling yet again.

"You would make a terrible, doll, Emma, and I think he knows that," she declared.

"Ugh," I spat out. "Just kick the damn tail lights out!"

Stella jerked at the sound of my very suddenly inclined vocal volume, and then threw her hands down to the floor on either side of herself.

"Okay!" she yelled back, the tinniest hint of annoyance laced in her sounds. "Fine, then..."

She proceeded to raise her head to see the end of the trunk, then tapped the corner, where the tail lights were, ever-so-gently with the tip of her left furry tan UGG.

I pursed my lips as she delivered another light pat to the area of plastic, and then another, and then one more before reaching forward and grabbing her arm.

"Stop," I ordered. "Just let me do it."

Stella let out a sound of a choking gasp.

"No, I got it," she spat at me, attempting to wave my hand away and tap the area once more.

"Stella, stop," I repeated. "Give me your shoes."

"No!" she screeched out, turning to slap my forearms with both of her hands.

"Stella!" I shouted, and then hit her hands back.

"Ah!" she shrieked, loud enough that I'm sure all of upper Wisconsin could have heard her, let alone the driver in the car carrying us to our probable deaths.

"Ow!" I replied, wincing at the sound of her voice before grabbing her shoulders and shaking her body in front of me. "Shut up and give me your shoes!"

Stella tried to slap my hands away, and then actually pushed me back a bit.

"No!" she yelled.

"Ugh," I muttered, removing my grasp from her and leaning back on my side.

She then quieted down, as did I, crossed her arms across her chest, and turned to face the wall of the trunk opposite of me. I studied her silent backside for a moment, and then flickered my eyes down to her feet.

And then, after that, I lifted myself partially to my hands and knees... and *then* lurched at her feet, arms outstretched and all.

I made no sounds as I grabbed her nearest shoe bottom, but she quickly took note of my ambush, screamed another high-pitched scream, and began to kick and flail her legs about. That didn't matter though, because I managed to slip one of her UGGs away from her before she had the chance to *really* smack my body.

"Ha!" I shouted, now proceeding to bend on my side and slip the cozy warm shoe over my right foot.

"Give that back, Emma!" Stella shouted. "You... You... beaver-headed bitch!"

"Shut up and scootch over," I commanded, right before I turned and aimed my clothed foot at the corner Stella had 'attempted' to break apart.

And *that* was right before she took her exposed, lime green-socked foot to the side of my face, a *lot* more forcibly than she had struck the side of the car earlier.

"Agh!" I yelled, throwing my arm in defense, though a little too late.

"Snitches get stitches, Emma!" Stella shouted as I held my throbbing cheekbone in my hand for a second.

"What?" I questioned, glancing back at to see her still laying on her back, arms crossed, her head held upright to view me.

"You heard me," she said. "So watch your back. You might not wake up tomorrow. Because you won't open your eyes. Because... they'll be sewed shut, snitch."

I stared at her for a moment.

"Whatever," I muttered, and then turned back to my dressed foot and the plastic covering ahead. I focused my attention on it for another moment, re-aimed Stella's boot at the corner of the trunk we were engaged in, and then stomped it just about as hard as I could.

But that didn't do anything.

But Miss Congeniality wouldn't give up so easily.

And neither would Halle Berry.

So, I smashed my foot into it again. And then again. And again. Again. And yet again.



"How's your genius plan working there, snitch?" Stella snickered.

"Shut up," I snapped before striking the corner another time.

And then another. And another. Another. And yet another.

"Why isn't this working!" I yelled out.

"Because Snoop Dogg hates you," Stella replied. "Wait... I mean God."

I looked back at her; she was on her side, her hands under her head, her eyes now closed.

"Well," I began. "I guess I *am* kind of cursed with bad luck for eternity now..." I looked back at my feet. "Ugh."

I flopped my back onto the scratchy floor once more, and then threw my hands over my own closing eyes.

"Why, *Snoop God*..." I mumbled out.

And then we hit a harsh bump, jolting both of our bodies up and down with the ride.

"Ow," Stella whispered, her voice pretty dull and monotone, though I kept my hands over my face and didn't care to look back at her any more.

And then we rolled over another one.

"Ow," she repeated, her tone remaining the same.

And another.

"Ow," she reiterated.

And then we one that was actually so hard and so abrupt that we were both *catapulted* forward, smashing into the frontside of the hard plastic separating us from the rest of the car as it seemed to somehow take one or two spins around, leaving a nauseating heartburn in the back of my throat from my dinner of ramen noodles and potato chips earlier that evening. At the same time, everything around us seemed to slow down while Stella screamed out in terror, up until when I heard a loud crunch sound screech out even louder than her from behind our backs.

And then, just as suddenly as the whole ordeal began, it fell to complete silence and complete stillness, meaning the car engine was no longer *running* and, in turn, no longer *moving*.

"What... the hell... was that..." I groaned, my face, stomach, and thighs physically stuck to the back wall of the trunk.

"Owie..." Stella grumbled in return, *her* body completely smashed up against the back of mine.

I fell quiet, then, and listened intently for any other sounds to start up around us for a long few moments, but there were none.

"Okay, Stella, you can peel yourself off of me, now," I whispered.

"But..." she began to respond. "I... can't..."

"What do you mean you *can't*?" I shot back, unable to move my head even an inch to peer over at her.

"There's no... room," she spoke.

"Oh, yes there is," I countered, and then attempted to push the both of us away from the wall in front of me.

However... I *couldn't*.

"Ow, Emma, stop," Stella spat out.

I paused for a second, and then reached my non-enclosed arm back as far as I could to feel a very oddly misshapen back wall, one that was definitely *much* closer and *much* differently formed than it was about two minutes ago.

"How the hell did *that* happen!" I yelled.

And, just then, an engine of another car directly behind us roared to life, making the both of us jump in place and forcing Stella to scream out, again.

I waited for the other car's rumbling sounds to slowly fade away, becoming more and more distant after I heard its tires squeal and screech out.

And then, again, silence.

"And, somehow, this just got worse..." I grumbled. "But..." I stopped and reached my one free arm up to touch the partially crushed trunk ceiling above us. "Maybe..." I pushed against it, hoping it would creak or crack open... but, of course, it didn't. "Ugh..."

I returned my hand to my side, and then lifted my top leg upward as much as I could, and, though it wasn't the one sheltered by Stella's boot, I used it to crash into the cold metal roof a time or two.

But, you can probably figure out by now that *that* didn't work, either.

"Oh..." I let out a soft whine or frustration as I dropped my aching foot once more.

"Um, Emma," Stella piped up from behind me, her nose buried into the side of my icy cold neck.

"What?" I snapped.

"I, uh-"

She stopped, suddenly, and then I felt a splash of burning hot, lumpy thick liquid hit the entire back of my scalp as I heard her let out a loud, deep gag.

"*Stella!*" I screamed out, throwing my one hand back to shield the back of my head.

After a quick second or two, though, she finished her vomiting spell, and I wiggled my fingers to flip some of her stomach chunks off of my hand.

"Ew, Emma, don't do that!" Stella shouted.

I froze and bit my bottom lip for a moment.

"I swear to God, Stella..." I grumbled, my teeth gritted as I slapped my moistened hand back down to my hip.

I paused for another long moment.

"It was already bad," I stated, trying to at least relax my voice some small bit. "And then it was worse. And then it was *the* worst. And *now*..." I stopped. "I don't even know *what* to call this. It's worse than the worst of the worst. It's like my life is *A Series of Unfortunate Events* on steroids. Not *just* steroids, either, it's like steroids on cocaine. Oh, and not just that, either, but steroids on cocaine on methamphetamine, and probably even steroids on coke on meth on some other drug that's so bad not even El Chapo himself would ever traffic it to the public." I stopped, again. "Yep, that sounds about like my life right now. So... whenever our kidnapper would like to come and spoon my eyeballs out, I'm ready for him."

I fell to silence.

"God, Emma," Stella eventually piped up. "You don't have to be so dramatic about it..."

I blinked at the black wall my nose was scrunched up against for a second.

"You're right, Stella," I began. "I *don't*... so, so sorry about that."

"Thank you," she accepted my 'apology'.

We then both feel back to silence for... quite a few minutes.

"Ugh," I, after a long time, picked up. "Seriously... when *is* that guy gonna come get us out of here?"

Stella sighed out.

"I don't know," she replied. "But I'm tired. And bored. And hungry..." She paused. "I think I'll call my mom now."

"Wait, *what?*" I shot back. "You... You've had your phone on you... this whole time?"

I felt Stella shift around against my back.

"Uh..." she began to reply. "I mean... I *guess*; I have my lipstick, too, and my debit card-

"Give me it!" I screeched, reaching my still slimy and half-frozen hand back to blindly grab at her wrists.

"Ow, Emma!" she yelled as I felt and grabbed around at her forearms, then snatched up a small, smooth piece of plastic once I found it.

I whipped my hand in front of my face as well as I could and flickered her light pink iPhone's screen on.

"What are you *doing?*" she groaned.

"Calling the cops," I shot back as began to dial in an emergency number. "And then I'll hold back my urge to spoon out *your* eyeballs when I get out of this claustrophobic hell."

## Waking and Entering

Okay, let's recap for a second.

A very tripped-out Stella Anderson showed up at my, Emma Lenford's, house on Monday the 27th of March, dragged me, Emma Lenford, from my night of hot showers and potato chips into the snowy dark unknown outside... and then, somehow, took me, Emma Lenford, along on a ride in the trunk of a kidnapper's stolen black Mercedes. And I know it was stolen, too, because, after an eternity of being cramped in the tight box with a gagging, physically ill Stella Anderson, I was able to actually execute what I guess you could call *plan G*, or something like that, which was... call 911 and summon the county police to save Stella before I clawed her hair follicles out of her pretty little head.

Oh, and to bring me some pants.

So, after the cops eventually arrived on the scene, busted the oddly deformed trunk open, and gave me a blanket and some slippers to put on, the head chief, or whoever, tried to explain to me what must have happened.

*"This here car is listed as a stolen vehicle," he began, rubbing the edges of his gray, unfortunately untrimmed mustache as I stood in front of him, shivering under my blanket with chunks of Stella's stomach acid still ice-encased in my hair. "And it seems like someone hit this here back end, and that must've mashed you two gals in there all up and tight... and then whoever it was must've done a hit and run, too... and then the driver who you nabbed you two took off, too... and not one other nosy Wisconsin driver passing by stopped and checked out the abandoned car, either... Well, now you poor lil' ladies, that's just one steaming heap of bad luck."*

My luck indeed.

As for the creep/ 'modeling agent', his whereabouts are unknown, and the police said they'd *look into it...*

But the past is in the past now, anyway, right?

Well, I ended up skipping school the very next day. My dad had no problem calling me in 'sick' after he found out I had to be picked up from the police... *again*.

As for Stella Anderson, she just couldn't stand to let down her all important *perfect attendance* standing... so she went to school completely hung over and running on nothing but ten minutes of nighttime sleep and about six different types of cappuccinos.

However, that adrenalized mixture and day full of state-mandated education must have sparked something in her slow synapses, because she just so happened to call me up after she returned home with what was actually quite a brilliant plan dealing with the devil's very own witch-child, Miranda Lively.

And that bring us here, to Thursday night, in Stella's 'retro' slug-bug, parked across the street from Miranda's house.

Because Miranda wouldn't have been home, asleep in her own bed, probably any of the next few weekend nights... at least, not *alone*.

"Okay, so," Stella started, killing the engine and un-clicking her seatbelt. "Her mom sleeps with earplugs because of her stepdad who snores too loud to be awoken by absolutely anything, and all of her stupid stepbrothers live with *their* mom a block away, and, as far as I know, there are no pets in this household other than *Bubble-Oh-*

Seven the goldfish, so..." She stopped to slide a pair of black sunglasses over the tip of her nose. "We should be good."

I looked from the cloudy dark night outside the front windshield to her face.

"Is that really necessary?" I questioned.

"What?" she snapped. "I like to do my research *ahead* of time, Emma, and you'll probably thank me later..."

"No," I stopped her. "Not that; the, uh..." I gestured to my own eyes with outstretched fingers. "The sunglasses."

"Oh," she shot out, then glanced down to her car's dashboard. "Well, here, I have another pair." She grabbed a nearly identical pair of shades from the cubby beneath her radio system. "*Nobody* switches a blade on the guy in shades."

She held the free pair out to me; I looked from her hand to her shielded expression.

"No, thanks," I refuted.

"Whatever," she spat back, and then replaced the glasses in the miniature cabinet. She leaned back in her seat before looking back at me. "You ready?"

I nodded back, no words necessary.

I'm actually not the most avid talker when I'm tired, and there's about a ninety-seven percent chance that I'll be pretty exhausted at three a.m. on a school morning.

Stella grinned the tiniest bit.

"Kay," she said, and then whipped herself toward the driver's side door. "Let's bust this bitch!"

I did nothing but raise an eyebrow as she threw the door open and hopped out, and then turned to do the same from the passenger's side.

Once out of the car, Stella rushed across the vacant street, and I decided to follow a bit more sluggishly behind her. I looked over the front of the Lively's large, two-story tan house, then the closely identical next door neighbors on either side, each of them only separated by a few feet of snow and a tall, white picket fence.

"Damn Levittowns," I muttered, shaking my head a bit, right before I continued on toward the front door beside the Lively's garage, where Stella stood.

"Miranda keeps a key under the third rock," she said, kneeling down in front of the iced-over landscaping underneath a window on our left. "For when she can't get to sleep and calls up someone to *put* her to sleep."

She overturned the third rock in the line beside out feet and, low and behold, a small golden key had been concealed underneath it. After that, she popped back up and spun to the door, then followed up by inserting it carefully into the keyhole under the handle and turning to knob itself ever-so cautiously.

She gently propelled the tall white door a few inches forward, and then glanced back at me from over her shoulder, pulling her shades down to her nose.

"Oh, shit; we in," she whispered, flashing the quickest grin.

"Not until you step through the door," I grumbled, and then pushed past her to step into the house. "Now, let's just get this all over with so I can go back to sleep before my Spanish test tomorrow."

"Well," Stella went on, trotting quietly in behind me. "Technically, it's *today*, actually."

"Oh, Stella," I softly whined, twisting around to face her. "Please don't be one of *those* people."

I watched her remove her sunglasses and slide them into her back jean pocket. However, as soon as she did that, she flipped the dark hood of her black pull-over over the top of her bouncy blonde ponytail, and then tugged it down to slightly below her eyebrows.

"Okay," she simply mumbled, and then turned to both take the key out of the door and shut it softly behind us.

I, myself, twisted to take in our new surroundings.

To the direct left: an excessively large, vacant dining area complete with a glass chandelier and tall display of frosted cupcakes in the center of the long table underneath it; straight ahead: a lengthy corridor with a spiral-style staircase at the very end of it, expensive-seeming paintings and wide doorways leading up to the wide, spacious area surrounding it; to the immediate right: a wall.

"Wow," I commented on my observations.

"Okay, come on," Stella whispered, now stepping lightly in front of me.

Soon enough, I obeyed her command, and followed close behind her as she turned into the first left doorframe through the faintly lit hallway. After that, I stopped to take in quite a spacious living area, which was connected to an even larger kitchen area, which was connected to the vast lofty area that held the staircase I mentioned earlier.

"Good Lord," I mumbled out, and then turned to Stella's back as she stopped a few steps in front of me. "Why does she need *your* dad's money, again?"

Stella spun around to face me, her black hood flopping even farther down as she did so.

"Because," she started, yanking the hood back up to her forehead. "She's a heartless bitch with an online gambling problem."

I stared back at her for a second, and then nodded right before she pivoted back on her heels.

She made her way to the kitchen on the right, and I decided to follow in her footsteps.

"Now," she began, again, pausing to gaze around the area a bit. "I'm not sure where her closet is..."

I stepped up beside her.

"Maybe in her *room*," I flatly suggested.

Stella glared over at me.

"In a house like *this*?" she stressed.

She then rolled her eyes and turned away from me, afterward proceeding to pace around to the hall area once more.

I rolled my own eyes to myself as she walked away.

"*In a place like this*?" I mocked, quietly enough that she couldn't hear me, and then stepped myself in the direction of the refrigerator on the other side of the kitchen island in front of me. Once I reached it, I looked over my shoulder, saw that Stella (and, luckily enough, everyone *else* currently in the house) was out of sight, and then turned back and proceeded to crack it open.

"What kind of goodies do we keep in our pantry, Miss Miranda?" I mumbled as I looked over the array of V8 drinks, plain vanilla yogurts, and single bag of two apples and one mango. "Figures... with a fridge this big, of *course*."

I paused for a second when my eyes got to the bottom shelf, though, where, literally, about forty to fifty glass bottles of mocha Starbucks Frappuccinos sat.

"Well," I went on, reached out to just touch one of them. "A little pick-me-up couldn't hurt."

I continued to snatch up the frontmost bottle, and then used my other hand to fill in the gap it left with the surrounding jars.

"I could probably use it, anyway," I commented, gently closing the fridge and turning back around.

I then stepped all the way over to the long, cream-colored sofa facing the, probably, approximately one hundred-inch flat screen television in the den area nearby. Once there, I stepped around it, plopped down, and twisted the cap off my icy cool coffee glass. However, unfortunately, a small amount of the liquid dripped off of the cap and down to hit the sofa right between my two thighs in the exact same moment.

"Shit," I cursed, replacing the cap and leaning forward, the glass outstretched in my left hand as I pushed my grey sweatshirt sleeve down on my right wrist and began my attempt of rubbing the splotchy new stain away.

As I did so, though, every dim light around me abruptly shut off.

I froze, and then listened as a creaky pair of footsteps piped up from somewhere slightly beyond the kitchen behind me, followed by a rusty, deep man's voice singing a slightly familiar tune.

"*You used to call me on my cellphone...*" he, whoever it was, grumbled out... pretty flatly, too. "*Late night when you need my love...*"

I narrowed my brows, then silently shifted in place and peered out from behind the backside of the couch I sat on.

A vividly middle-aged man with a long, graying beard was walking up to the kitchen island, a crackly plastic bag in his hands. He raised it to the countertop, sat it on the edge, and then pulled out what, seriously, looked like a live turtle.

I stared at *him* a little longer as he stared *it*.

And, actually, yes... it seriously *was* a turtle, one with the shell and the moving legs and all.

He reached into the bag once more, and then pulled out a dangling gold chain.

He proceeded to double-wrap the necklace around the neck of the turtle.

"*I know when that hotline bling,*" he continued, and then let out a slight chuckle. "Oh, they're so clueless, aren't they, Caper?"

I raised my brows, and then ducked back down behind the sofa's back as he snatched up the now empty bag and started to step around the island. I waited for his steps to trail off, and then looked down at my drink through the new sense of darkness around me.

"Oh, God," I whispered, and then took a big swig from the glass.

I then heard a door slam, followed by silence.

"I'm so tired I'm... I'm actually *hallucinating*," I uttered out.

Just then, a softer pair of steps began to patter into the room,

"*Emma!*" I heard, clearly, Stella's voice loud-whisper from a few feet away.

I popped my head over the back of the couch as I twisted the cap back on my drink, and then saw her figure make its way into the room.

"Stella!" I not exactly *whispered* out as I jumped up from the sofa. "Oh my God, I-"

Stella snapped her head toward me, and then rushed over to hush me with her finger.

"*Sh*," she mumbled, and then paused for a long moment. "Why did you turn the lights off?"

I stared at her for an even longer moment.

"They're..." I cocked my head to look at her sideways. "*Really*... off?"

She threw her hushing finger down and slapped her sides.

"Uh, *yeah*," she replied.

I paused before stepping completely around the couch's armrest between us.

"Okay, well, then," I said as I tapped on the aluminum cap on the bottle in my hands. "Stella, I saw..." I stopped, glanced over at her yet again, and pursed my lips. "A, um... the... neighborhood... veterinarian, or the... royal turtle catcher, or something, and he, like..." I turned and gestured to the kitchen island a few feet to the right of us. "Came in here, and then... pulled a live turtle out of a Walmart bag, and then... put a..." I looked back at her. "A gold chain on it, and he was... singing... Drake..."

Stella searched me a second, and then shrugged.

"Probably a Canadian," she answered. "That was sleeping with Miranda's mom. Or *Miranda*..."

"But," I objected, lowering my hands to my thighs. "He was *old*..."

"Probably her mom, then," Stella said. "Or her *dad*..." She glanced to the side wall for a second, then turned back to me. "I don't know; her parents have weird kinks, I guess."

I raised a brow.

"Do they have... *turtle* kinks?" I questioned.

She paused, and then tilted her head to the side.

"You know," she started. "Actually, I *did* find some pressed flowers in a box in their library a second ago..." She stopped, and then nodded at me. "Maybe it's, like, a nature thing."

She continued to nod, straight-faced, as I looked her over.

"Uh, *yeah*..." I muttered back. "*Maybe*..."

"There *are* worse kinks, Emma," Stella went on, now stepping past my side and spinning around on her heels. "Like, I've heard that in some parts of Africa, men will let pharaoh ants climb up their urethras for the enjoyment of their wives."

"Oh, God," I spat out, turning toward her as she continued to pace around the kitchen island ahead.

"Now, come on," Stella whispered, continuing from the kitchen to the stairs' area ahead. I took a second before obeying, but, after reaching the edge of the steps behind her, she stopped and looked back over at me.

"We have to find her closet first, okay?" she said, and then flickered her eyes down to the glass jar in my hands. "Oo, where'd you get that?" She proceeded to reach out, snatch up the container, and then, somehow, let it slip from her fingers down to the floor.

It promptly smashed into the ground, though, luckily, and surprisingly, it didn't break open. It did, however, release the sound of a supersonically loud *bang*.

"Damn it, Stella," I cursed under my breath as I dropped to my knees and grabbed it back up.



"Oh, sorry," she mumbled, and I popped back up to my feet right after. We looked at each other for one silent moment.

And then Stella reached out to seize me by my left wrist while the bottle was in both of my hands.

"Okay, no one's coming, come on," she urged, spinning around to face the bottom of the stairs once more.

"Stella!" I loud-whispered at her, and then pulled my right hand, now holding the coffee cup, away from her as she yanked my body forward.

"Sh!" she scolded, continuously pulling me as she trotted up the bottom two spiral steps.

Without much choice, I followed her heels to the very top, and then stopped right behind her as she looked hurriedly left and right. I jerked my wrist away from her, and then looked around, myself.

There was a second large den in a loft-style area overlooking the stairs ahead and on the left; straight ahead of that was a long corridor, behind us was the back half of the lengthy hallway, and, to the side, nothing but a wall.

Oh, and, of course, there were closed doors everywhere.

"Do you happen to have a map?" I asked.

"No, Emma," Stella grumbled back, turning back to me. "We just have to check every door until we find... the right closet."

"Lord," I murmured.

Stella spun back around, and then began to lightly step away from me.

"You check those back there," she commanded, pointing behind her back. "And be, like, really careful about it."

I watched her pace up to the side of the nearest door ahead, and then took another long drag on my stolen coffee bottle. After that, I took a deep breath, twisted around, and slugged myself forward. I forged my way to the closest door beyond the staircase, and then stopped right beside it.

I leaned an ear against it and placed my free hand over its knob. After hearing no sounds of vitality from the other side, then, I gradually turned the handle and creaked the passageway open.

I poked my head inside the pitch black room, allowed my eyes to adjust to the darkness a moment, and then blinked a few times to pick up the sight of a toilet, double sink, and spacious, decorative counters all encased in a moderately sized room.

"Nope," I whispered, leaning back out to hallway. "Not here for *that* business."

I crossed the hall and pushed my ear up to the next door in line while, at the same time, glancing to Stella down the corridor, where she was standing, hands on hips, in front of a door that she had, as it would seem, apparently just swung completely back on its hinges.

"So much for being careful," I commented, now turning to push the door in front of me open by just an inch. After that, I peered inside to see a small enclosed area complete with two tall red machines with circular glass doors on their frontsides, tall white plastic baskets stacked all around them.

"No," I grumbled, closing the door once more and stepping up to the next one on the same side of the hall. As soon as I reached it, however, I picked up on some very human-like noises from the other side.

"I like Ben and all," a highly-pitched, feminine voice spoke out. "But, he's just... so... what's the word..."

"Platitudinous?" a grumbly, masculine counterpart piped up.

I stepped closer and leaned my ear inward.

"No..." the female replied.

"Peremptory?" the man asked.

"What the hell," I mouthed, just to myself.

"No..." the woman said.

"Phlegmatic?" the male questioned.

"No..."

I listened intently as this went on for a while longer.

"Languid?"

"No..."

"Languorous?"

"No..."

"Discommodious?"

"No..."

"Inexpedient?"

"No..."

"Temerarious?"

"No... but close..."

The man paused for a long moment.

"Impertinent?"

"No..."

"Traducing?"

"Yes!"

I shifted on my feet and narrowed my brows.

"I mean," the woman continued. "He's nice and all, too, but... the honing steel? That was so cold... and, I don't know, I still miss Ron a lot; he was just so... so..."

"Copacetic?" the man asked.

"No..." the woman responded.

I took a quiet breath.

"Meritorious?"

"No..."

"Saporous?"

"No..."

I turned back toward where Stella was to see her suddenly charging my way, waving her arms all around as she did so. I pushed myself away from the door and met her halfway through the hallway as she began to speak.

"Emma," she whispered. "I found it!"

"Thank God," I remarked.

"Come on, come on!" she bounced in place and grabbed my wrist, the one holding the coffee glass yet again.

"Stella, sh," I murmured, quickly tossing the bottle to my other hand before I would inevitably be forced to throw it to the ground.

She then jerked me forward and dragged my arm all the way to a widely-opened door at the very end of the right side of the hall. After we both slowly to a stop in front of its brightly lit core, she released my wrist, and then let me take in the contents of an *enormous* pink closet.

There were racks on racks of dresses and tops, stands on stands of heels and boots, and drawers on drawers of... well, I didn't really know, because they were all closed, but I'm sure it was full of more articles of clothing.

Stella stepped to the center of the room, where a large, white furry ottoman sat.

"And look at this," she said, gesturing for me to come closer.

I followed command, and then followed her gaze to the right, where all of the shirts against the wall were pushed to either side of a dangling pair of pristinely white pants covered in clear plastic, each end of the wrapping tightly knotted to keep the inner contents as untouched as humanly possible.

"*The pants...*" I awed.

There they were.

The infamous white pants Miranda was rumored to worship and wear for precisely seven minutes and seven seconds every single day.

The notorious white pants that supposedly gave Miranda the 'mystical powers' she required to fuel her devious witchcraft practices.

The legendary white pants Stella and I were praying actually existed so that we could break into Miranda's house, steal them, and use them as persuasion to make Miranda submit to our orders of which were now soon to come.

And there they were.

"They're so..." I began. "Hm, *what's the word...*"

"Small," Stella answered for me, stepping forward to snatch them from the rack they swung from. "I mean, Emma, look at this..." She stepped back and held the pants against her waistline, then bent her neck to look down at them for a long moment. "They could almost fit *me...*" She glanced back up at me. "And, Emma, you know *I* have a tiny ass..."

"That's..." I sluggishly responded, studying the pants for a while. "Very... true..."

"I mean," Stella went on. "I know Miranda does her cardio and crud..." She kept the slacks held up against her legs as she leaned onto one side and slid her free hand up to her hip. "But, honestly, she's like a *tower...* and squats can only do so much for the baby that's got back, right?"

I flickered my eyes from the pants (which, for the record, were actually sized for the average woman's physique, though they did seem a tad on the small side to me for Miranda herself, who was a little bit taller and bigger in the backside than the average adult female) to Stella's face.

"Sure..." I muttered.

"So," Stella shot back, and then leaned toward me a bit. "*How* does she fit into these?"

She turned to the side, and then stepped over to where a set of three full-length body mirrors sat against the wall nearby, right in front of the ottoman. I looked her over a moment as she looked herself over in the glass, and then began to tap on my coffee bottle's cap as she continued.

"I mean," she started. "If she's so into witching and shit, why doesn't she just, like... pop a potion, or... suck a spell, or... *something* to make them bigger?" She twisted back and forth a bit, her eyes still glued to the mirror. "Or make herself smaller?" She paused, and then shot her gaze over to me. "Or what if she already does that?"

I shrugged, and then stepped over to her side.

"I don't know, Stella," I said. "But maybe you should ask her."

"Oh, good idea," she replied, and then threw the pants on the ottoman behind herself. After that, she stepped back, out of her classic tan UGGs, and began to reach for the fly on her light-wash skinny jeans.

"Now what are you doing?" I asked of her.

"I'm changing into those pants, Emma," she answered. "What does it look like?"

"Like you're about to come onto either me or Miranda's kinky parents down the hall," I shot back.

Stella let out a quite loud laugh as she slid her trousers off of her feet, revealing her hot-pink, cheetah-print panties underneath.

"Oh, Emma," she giggled, now reaching for the wrapped white pants beside us. "I don't think even anyone in *this* house could afford a night with *me*."

I glared at her as she unwrapped the slacks, slipped them on, and then turned back to the mirror to showcase.

"They're a little big," I commented, studying the baggy thick leggings from her flat behind to the slabs of material that flopped around her feet.

"Yeah, but," Stella said, turning back to me. "Miranda could fix that, right?"

I stared blankly at her for a second, and then responded with nothing but another shrug.

"Well," she went on, looking back at the mirror. "Either way, as long as I'm wearing them when we go talk to her, she can't use any of her witch powers on us... right? Like, they only work when she wears the pants?"

She wrinkled her nose over to me.

"I don't think they work at *all*, actually, so..." I voiced.

"Yeah, but," Stella countered, now spinning around to gather her own pants and shoes. "She *actually* cursed you with, like, bad luck, right?"

I paused while she turned back to me once more and dropped her garments on the ottoman beside the deserted hanger and plastic wrap.

"Well," I began. "I wouldn't call it so much *bad luck* as I would... just... *slight misfortune*."

Stella shook her head.

"Emma," she said. "That's the exact same thing."

I paused, again, and searched her expression.

"You know," I started. "You're right, actually, for once." I nodded. "We should go *destroy* those God-forsaken skinny jeans."

"They're *jeggings*, actually," Stella stated.

I rolled my eyes, and then grabbed her by the forearm.

"Just come on," I spat as I spun around and hurled the both of us toward the hallway.

I dragged her into the corridor, much like she had with me on all of the previous occasions of the night, looked from right to left, and then glanced back at Stella.

"Where, exactly, is Miranda's room?" I asked.

Stella paused for a second.

"Um," she began. "Maybe one of these..."

I let go of her wrist and allowed her to cross the hall in front of me as she pointed to the two closed doors that sat there.

"Okay," I agreed, walking up to the opposite side of the left one from where she was.

"So, we should..." she went on, now slowly wrapping her hand around the door's handle. "Just, like..."

She threw her hand back down and turned to me.

"Emma, should we *really* do this?" she questioned.

I paused before replying.

"Well, it was *your* idea," I began, tapping on my glass top once again. "Much like every other one of your plans that end up in tragedy or minor inconveniences, so..." I searched her face for a split millisecond. "*Yeah.*"

I nodded, and then reached for the knob myself.

"But, Emma," Stella uttered. "Wait-"

Before she could grumble on any further, I twisted the handle and flung the door forward. After that, I rushed into the new room, turned to the left wall, and searched for a light switch.

Stella tiptoed in behind me, and then whispered out loud.

"*Miranda?*"

Right after that, I grabbed at the light lever I had finally found, flipped it upward, and called out in the room as I spun around and while it lit up with blinding light.

"Wakey-wakey Miss Shady Mandy!" I yelled at half volume.

I stopped, then, while I scanned the contents of the room.

It contained nothing but an untouched, fully-made blue king sized bed, an undecorated tan dresser, and a large painting of a light house on a rocky beach scene.

"Damn," I cursed, and then turned back to the doorway.

"Uh, Emma," Stella started.

"I know," I urged back, already flipping the light switch back to its original position and stepping out of the area. As soon as Stella decided to follow me out, I shut the door and made my way to the next one in line.

"I always thought guest bedrooms were an urban legend," I muttered.

"We have five," Stella commented.

I stopped and gazed back at her.

"Why, what do *you* do with *your* spare rooms?" she questioned.

I paused a moment longer.

"I don't *have* spare rooms," I answered.

Stella mouthed 'oh' and crossed her arms. I ignored her condescendence, however, and moved back to the door. I reached out to it with my free hand, then paused and looked back at her once more.

"Maybe we should go in a bit more quietly this time," I suggested.

Stella uncrossed her arms and nodded.

"Kay," I murmured and went on to both grab at and creak forward the door handle. I peered into the dark room, and then slipped inside, Stella close behind me.

I glanced around for a quick second, though it didn't take long to see that we were now in a fairly large, female-oriented bedroom with framed flower pictures for decorations and cabinets of books for functionality. There was also a long, but traditional, desk against the far wall with a lamp on top of it turned on and, get this, another king-sized bed directly on the left. A king-sized bed with, actually, some living, breathing being buried underneath its messy pink covers.

I stared at the bed for a second longer, and then turned back to Stella.

"What now?" she mouthed to me.

"Uh..." I began under my breath, glancing back and forth between her and the creature. "Shut the door."

Stella nodded, and then obeyed my command. After that, she came back to me and popped another intriguing question.

"Now what?"

"Um," I responded, turning back to the bed, poking at my coffee's lid. "Wake her up, I guess."

"How?" Stella persisted.

I shot my gaze back at her.

"I don't know," I growled. "Just... poke her, or shake her, or pinch her, or flick her, or kiss her, or... I don't care."

Stella wrinkled her nose.

"Ew," she whispered. "I don't want to touch her."

"Well, neither do I," I spat back.

She proceeded to cross her arms and glare over at where Miranda lay, just for a moment, and then looked back at me.

"Dump your coffee on her," she commanded.

"No!" I loud-whispered back. "I'm still drinking it; I'm not gonna waste it on her."

Stella narrowed her brows.

"Well, then," she huffed. "*You* can figure out a better way to do it."

I fell quiet, and then turned to scan the contents of the room a bit more in detail. Most specifically, I focused my attention on the storage cabinet behind myself and decided to walk over to it to search it even further.

There were shelves of baskets filled with both the most common and most random items one could possibly think of, from things like glue, Sharpies, and multicolored index cards to more unconventional objects such as a small bottle of bleach, a large bag of rat poison, and, my favorite, a hodgepodge pack of condoms, each one a different brand and size from all the others, wrapped together with a bundle of hair ties.

Without having to search too much further, though, I decided to place my coffee bottle down on top of the shelving unit, and then picked up a clear sandwich bag full of what I believed to be miniature plastic black spiders.

"Here," I said, spinning around with them to face Stella.

I proceeded to unlock the top of the bag, reach in, grab an arachnid replica from the top of the pile, and then chucked it at the sleeping beast in front of us.

"What are those?" Stella questioned as I stepped forward and snatched up another one.

"Fake spiders," I answered, and then threw another one at the dark mess of hair poking out from underneath the covers ahead.

"Ew," Stella commented, though she proceeded to step forward and take one from the bag as well; I grabbed another one while she tossed it at the headboard of the bed.

"You have awful aim," I muttered as I threw the next spider at the back of Miranda's head.

"No, I don't," Stella grumbled, grabbing another two spiders to throw over the bed entirely.

I let out the shortest lived chuckle, and then bounced yet another piece of black plastic off of Miranda's skull.

And, immediately following that, she threw a hand over her hair and began to moan out.

"What the hell..." she groaned, snatching up a spider stuck in her hair. She began to roll over as she glanced down at it. "Ugh, *Ronnie*..."

She completed flipped herself over, and then pierced her eyeliner-smear'd gaze right up at both Stella and I.

"What the hell!" she instantly boomed out, now pulling herself up to a sitting position.

"Oh, um, she's awake now, Emma," Stella mumbled from my side.

"What do you think you two are doing!" Miranda continued, now throwing her blankets off her body to reveal that she was wearing nothing but a plain black bra and a pair of *sheer* blue undies.

"Oh, my," Stella whispered.

She proceeded to swing her legs over the edge of the bed, and then pushed herself up to stand; I countered her by stepping forward and launching every plastic spider left in the bag at her face and chest.

"Sit back down, Miranda," I ordered.

She closed her eyes as the plastic scraps struck her face, and then stumbled back onto the bed before reopening them.

"We have a few things that we want to..." I paused. "*Tell* you."

She glanced from me down to her chest, and then pulled one of the spiders from the left cup of her bra.

"*Oh*," she snarked, (thankfully) crossing her legs as she tossed the arachnid over her shoulder. "You *do*?"

I stopped to look her over a moment.

"*Well*..." Stella butted in.

I reached back to slap her shoulder.

"Uh, *yeah*, we do," I stated.

Miranda crossed her arms, exposing her chest a little bit more than it already was.

"I hope it's about my money," she said.

I nodded.

"It is, actually," I stopped. "Kind of."

She raised a brow and glared at me for a few seconds too many. I looked from her, to Stella, to my hands, and then dropped the empty plastic bag I still held.

"Miranda," I began, glancing back up as I tucked my hands behind my hips. "We're not going to give you 'your money'."

Miranda smirked.

"And why not?" she inquired.

"Because," I shot right back. "We... don't *want* to."

She rolled her eyes.

"Not good enough," she said, and then leaned forward, revealing her boobs even more than before as... a sign of dominance, probably. "You *do* know what I'm capable of, right?" She paused. "Stella knows, doesn't she?"

I turned back to Stella, who was silently standing with her hands clasped in front of herself. I watched her for a moment, and then she glanced over at me.

"It's not much," she remarked.

I smirked a bit, and then looked back at Miranda as she leaned back.

"Oh, but I'm sure *you* remember," she said. "*Miss Luckless Lenford.*"

I paused for a second.

"Yeah," I began. "But that's not really *good enough.*"

"That was just the beginning," Miranda shot back. "I still have quite a few tricks up my sleeve."

"Oh?" I questioned, stepped to one side as I crossed my arms. "Are you referring to your... *pant sleeves?*"

I lowered my eyes to the white trousers Stella still wore, and then glanced back at Miranda to see she had followed my gaze.

"Is it true you can't do much of..." I started. "*Anything* without these?"

Miranda chuckled and glared back at me.

"Oh," she laughed out. "You're so naive."

I paused.

"But," I began, again, my voice lowered a tad, as I lowered my hands to my sides. "You *do* need these... *right?*"

"Emma," Miranda went on, uncrossing her own arms. "Do you know *why* I need my money?"

I looked from Stella to her.

"Gambling?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"You see," she went on, re-crossing her legs the other way around. "Neither of you would understand." She nodded at Stella. "Stella's the youngest child; she gets the most blessings from her family." She nodded at me. "And you're a *lonely* child, Emma; you get *all* your father's allowances."

"It's pronounced *only* child," I snapped.

"But," Miranda continued. "Poor little me... I have five stepbrothers, and *this* is all I get."

She threw her hands up and gestured around herself; I glanced around her twenty square-foot room and noted my new observations of a gas-heated fireplace across the way and the glass door leading to a balcony area nearby it.

"Um," I started.

"But, *please*, Emma," Miranda cut me short. "If you think Stella, the girl you hated five weeks ago, deserves the money more than I do, then-"

"*Stop*," I, well, stopped her. "Your arguments are worse than a politician's on pot." I looked back at the pants hanging from Stella's waist. "And, you know what?"

I stopped, spun around, marched up to the cabinet close behind, snatched up my once used coffee bottle, turned back around, stepped up to Stella's side, popped the



cap off, and then splashed all the remaining contents onto one of the clean white legs of her slacks.

"Ew, Emma," Stella muttered, stepping back a bit, after the fact.

"There," I stated as I dropped the empty glass down to the floor.

I shot a glance back at Miranda, who was now frozen, staring at the dripping pants with a wide-eyed look.

"Oh, and you know what else?" I spat, turning back to face Stella. "I think Stella told me once..." I stepped closer to her, grabbed her arm, and spun her around. I then knelt down by the leg of the pants which was untouched by the sopping liquid. "That coffee..." I reached out and grabbed at the side seam of the trousers. "Gives her..." I pulled the edges of the seam in opposite directions. "The *runs*..."

I yanked at the fabric a few times, but it wasn't ripping exactly as I had hoped.

"Hang on..." I mumbled, then stood back up, returned to the cabinet area, grabbed a pair of scissors from one of the top shelves, and came back to Stella's side.

I crouched back down, opened the scissors, pulled a ruffle of the pants' fabric outward, and then sliced a chunk of them completely out. After that, I wedged the cutting tool into the newly crafted hole and chopped a long line upward.

"That's cold," Stella mumbled under her breath as I tossed the scissors over my shoulder and ripped the hole in the pants even wider with my hands.

"And," I continued, now standing back up and gazing over at still and speechless Miranda. "You know what *else*?"

I spun around and went back to the hodgepodge cabinet, snatched up a thick, bright red Sharpie, and then returned to Stella.

"What was it you said earlier, Stella?" I asked, cocking my head to one side.

"I... I didn't-" Stella began back, shaking her head softly.

"Did you say you had started your period?" I continued, ignoring her remarks. "Or were you just..." I paused and flicked the top off of the marker I held. "*Spotting*?"

Stella uttered out a little '*huh*?' while I spun her around, reached downward, and proceeded to poke the tip of the burgundy marker all over her coffee-stained bottom. She began to giggle as I left a slew of bright polka dots in my wake.

"*Tickles*..." she quietly chuckled out.

"And now," I eventually quit and dropped the marker to the floor as well. "Wouldn't you say those were some pretty good *burns*?" I stepped back and looked up at Miranda as she flickered her silent eyes to me. "Or that... I'm on *fire*?"

"Oh, Emma," Stella chimed in, turning to face me once more. "Please *don't*..."

I glared back at her for a second.

"Well, not *now*," I said. "But..." I looked back at Miranda yet again. "Believe me, I *will* take them outside, and I *will* torch them, and I *will* turn them into ashes." I stopped. "Unless you guys have some sort of neighborhood... or community guidelines against open flames outside, which... you probably *do*, because this is a really nice place, but..." I raised my hands to my hips. "I *will* do... *all* of that somewhere beyond your community fences, *believe you me*."

I glanced from expressionless Miranda to emotionless Stella.

"But, Emma," Stella started. "*Remember*..." She paused, and then both leaned closer to me and lowered her voice. "The *deal*?"

I stared at her and pursed my lips for a second, then turned away.

"But, of course..." I declared back to Miranda. "I *won't* take a blowtorch to those bottoms..." I pointed at the soiled pants barely clinging to Stella's legs. "*If* you promise to leave us alone and forget about the money."

Miranda looked back and forth between both Stella and I for a long moment, and then nodded her head.

"Fine," she shrugged.

I squinted at her.

"Really?" I questioned.

"*And*," Stella stepped forward and voiced. "Let us get you saying it on tape."

Miranda nodded, again.

"Fine," she repeated.

"*Really?*" I reiterated.

"Okay," Stella said, turning to me, though I kept my eyes glued to Miranda. "Emma, I need my phone."

I twisted back to her for a quick second.

"I don't have it," I muttered.

She narrowed her brows at me while I glanced from her to Miranda, then back to her.

"You *don't?*" she murmured.

I shook my head, and then looked back to Miranda as Stella paused for a long moment.

"*Oh!*" she eventually exclaimed. "Right..."

I looked back at her once more as she tilted her head down and reached one hand into the chest of her sweatshirt. She fished around underneath her top for a moment, and then whipped out a small, pink flower-cased smartphone. She flipped it over, then, took a small round chocolate that had slightly melted to its screen, and studied it slowly.

"Ick," she grumbled, and then tossed it over her shoulder. "Another Milk Dud..."

I stared at her as she returned her attention to her phone, unlocked it, and began to flip through a variety of bright screens.

"Okay," she mumbled, and then raised the device to point at where Miranda stood.

"Oh, wait..." She brought it back down to waist level. "This is the *camera*..."

I glanced from arms-crossed Miranda to still Stella.

"Don't we *need* the camera, Stella?" I questioned.

"Well, yes, but," she countered, glancing up at me. "This is the *picture* camera, Emma, and we need the *video* camera." She glared at me for a moment, and then glanced back down. "I can't find the video camera, though..."

"Well," I shot back. "Isn't there a button for it right there?"

"*Well*," Stella responded, scrolling through whatever it was she was looking at. "No, Emma, it's more complicated than that; this is a very complex, expensive phone."

I paused and looked from Miranda to her, again.

"Just let me look at it," I offered, reaching a hand out to take the device.

"No, Emma!" she snapped, now slapping my hand down.

"Stella..." I started, attempting to reach out to her yet again.

"Stop it!" she shouted, hitting me once again.

"Ow!" I yelled at the slight sting her force left me with.

I then slid my hand back down and leaned forward to watch her smartphone's flickering screen. I saw Stella pull up her camera app once more, and then locked my eyes at the red 'record' dot at the bottom of the picture.

"Right there," I commented, now pointing a finger at the button.

"No, Emma!" she repeated, shooting my hand down once more.

"Ow!" I shouted, again. "But it's just right there!"

"I got this, Emma," Stella stated.

"But it's just right-" I began to reiterate and point to the button yet again, but, before I could finish, I felt a strong tug on the back of my shirt, and then was forced to stumble backward.

"Oh, wait, I got it," Stella commented, still absorbed in her phone screen as I fell down to the ground and spotted Miranda hovering over my side with, of course, the pair of scissors I had used earlier in her hand.

I immediately shrieked out, and then she dove on top of me, aiming the scissors right at my nose.

"No!" I shouted, jerking my body onto my right side, avoiding a collision with her weapon. I then flipped over to my stomach, grabbed at the carpet ahead of me, and started to pull myself away.

But then I felt a grab on my left ankle, and then a quick cut on my right one.

"Ow!" I screeched, clutching the white carpet even tighter as I sensed a tug on both my feet.

"Ugh!" Miranda grunted, now dragging both of my legs back to her.

"No, no, no!" I cried as she moved her hands from my feet to my shoulders.

She then flipped my body back over, forcing me to witness her as she hovered over me and pinned down both my wrists.

"Stella!" I shouted out, glancing quickly back and forth until I found her standing by the doorway, her phone blocking her face, though pointed directly at our current brawl. "*Stella!*"

"Go, Emma!" she cheered back with a pump of her fist.

"Ugh..." I grumbled, turning back to Miranda, whose face was floating nearly inches above mine, as she released one of my hands to reach for the pair of scissors on my left and let her partially covered breast actually smack the side of my face.

Before she could snatch up the scissors, though, I took the liberty of pushing the side of her boobs the opposite direction and making her tumble off of me. After that, I snatched up the scissors myself and scrambled up to my feet as she rolled over to her backside beside me. I then lunged for the door nearby Stella, but, of course, Miranda got a hold on my ankles once more.

"I'll kill you, Emma Lenford!" she screeched while I dropped to my knees.

"Please don't!" I yelled back, reaching forward and kicking my feet back at her.

I glanced up at Stella for a split second, who was recording the whole ordeal right in front of my face.

"Stella, help me!" I ordered.

"But, Emma," Stella argued, though she never really finished whatever she intended to say.

"Arg!" Miranda shouted, now physically jumping over me and snatching up the scissors from my hand. Free from her grip, though, I rolled onto my side, and then jumped up to my feet.

"I'll kill you, bitch!" Miranda repeated as I hopped up to the closed door, steering clear of where she lay by a good foot or two as I did so.

I stopped for the briefest second in front of the doorway, reached for the door handle, and then witnessed the scissor blades as they were suddenly thrown at and wedged into the hardwood door literally one inch above my hand.

"Oh, God," I mumbled, widening my eyes at the sight.

"You *still* don't know what I'm capable of," Miranda growled behind my back.

I immediately turned the door knob and swung it back in front of myself.

"I think I do now, thanks," I shot back, right before I jumped out to hallway outside. "Come on, Stella!"

I reached back and grabbed Stella's wrist, then whipped her out to the corridor beside me, right before I slammed the door shut behind us.

"Oh, are we done, now?" Stella whined, still aiming the back of her phone at my distressed expression as I snapped my head over at her.

"Yes!" I screamed out. "Now, get in the car!"

I spun around and took off toward the stairs far ahead.

"But, Emma, my clothes..." she continued.

I whipped back around and ran back to her side.

"No time," I spat out, seizing her by her free wrist. I turned around, again, and dragged her all the way to staircase down the way. "Just *come on!*"

## The Wisconsin Hells

I'm pretty sure the Talket County Police Department is tired of seeing my face by now.

Here's why.

Since our planned run-in with Miranda didn't end so smoothly (and, admittedly, *now*, I guess I should have seen that coming... I mean, 'pinky promise you won't hold a grudge and try to stab me to death with a pair of scissors if I destroy your all-powerful skinny jeans... I mean *jeggings*, and not hand over *your* cash prize for holding me hostage in an unmarked Wisconsin woods for a night'... Maybe I should have brushed up Stella's original plan for her.), I decided to skip out on school the next morning (by telling my already anxious father that I was feeling a little under the weather; he's assuming I contracted pneumonia from laying naked in a car trunk with vomit in my hair for half of a five-degree winter night and is assuring me he will take me to the emergency room of the next town over's hospital as soon as he gets home from work... I'll take care of that trip later, though) and called the police department's number. I told them that I wanted to issue a restraining order against someone to protect my personal safety; they told me to go to the courthouse to take care of it. I told them this was urgent and that my suspected abuser might have been lurking outside my bedroom window at that very moment and that I didn't exactly have a car or driver's license (yes, I know, I am seventeen years old... but I'm working on that, okay?) or any means to get myself there; they told me they'd send an officer to pick me up and help me out and that they 'weren't busy anyway'.

Twenty minutes and a change from llama pajamas to suitable blue jeans later, a policeman showed up on my doorstep and, low and behold... it was the exact same one that had found Stella and I in the car trunk the other night.

*"Why, look who it is!" he greeted. "You poor luckless lil' lady... how much trouble you gon' get into?"*

Well, I convinced him that 'hopefully not much more' if I got as far away as possible from a certain Miranda Lively, and he agreed to take me back to the station and get things sorted out there, and, on the way, I made sure I informed him that I had specific evidence of her both physically and verbally threatening my life. At the station, then, I made sure I showed him and a few other officers the video Stella had captured and sent to my phone of Miranda herself attacking me and yelling 'I'll kill you, Emma Lenford! I'll kill you, bitch!'

And then, get this, one other male officer identified Miranda as some wanted fugitive that supposedly was the leader of a band of older boys that actually robbed the Chase bank of Monheeti County, just seventy miles north, by the *sheer underwear* she was wearing.

Apparently, he swore she had the 'same bottom half' as the woman they caught on a shaky security camera when the incident occurred five months ago, one in which she was wearing nothing but a ski mask, a cropped tee shirt, black gloves, knee-high brown boots, and a pair of panties that were just about identical to these.

Yes, it does sound very outlandish at first, but the police proceeded to pull up the old footage on a computer and played a clip of the video in which the masked lady stormed into the bank with a butcher knife, yelled out 'Ronnie', snapped her fingers as

five tall, also masked, men barged in behind her, and then whipped around to reveal a long, chestnut colored ponytail hanging down underneath her hat.

I don't know what exactly it was, but all of that information together made for a pretty convincing match to Miranda Lively herself.

And, apparently, the policemen thought so, too.

So, here's the best part.

The cops had a gut instinct that Miranda was at school in that moment, as did I, and I also kind of wanted to take that Spanish test by the end of the work day, so they offered me a ride there in exchange for assistance in locating and capturing Miranda.

Oh, and locate and capture the witch we did.

*I strolled through the front doors, one male and one female police officer behind me on either side. After that, I barged right through the door leading to the front office, glided up to the front desk, and leaned in to speak to the front red-headed secretary.*

*"I think we're going to need to use that," I declared, pointing at the intercom microphone in front of her.*

*She glared at me, and then shifted her gaze to the cops standing behind me.*

*"Oh..." she merely mumbled, then stood and scampered her hands to give it to me.*

*I cleared my throat as I took it from her, and then smashed my thumb against the button on its base.*

*"Would Miranda Lively please report to the front office, please? I repeat, Miranda Lively to the front office... immediately and with what's left of your dignity." I paused and flickered my eyes back up to the wide-eyed secretary in front of me. "Thank you."*

I spent a few long moments of quiet fidgeting before I took a seat and awaited her arrival, but, when she came, I hoped right up to see the scene play out before me.

*"Hands where we can see them, Lively," the female cop commanded as her partner revealed a pair of shiny silver handcuffs.*

*Miranda froze up in the doorway in front of us, and then threw her hands out by her sides. Her eyes slid over to me, then, as the male policeman proceeded toward her.*

*"Emma," I watched her mouth.*

*I clasped my hands in front of my waist and serenely stared as her wrists became fastened behind her own.*

*"Please come with us," the female cop said as Miranda was directed toward the office exit.*

*As she passed my side, then, I returned her deathly glare and mumbled into her direction.*

*"It'll be a little hard to kill me from where you're going," I whispered.*

And then she let out a little 'arg!' and attempted to lunge at me. However, she was quickly restrained by her new captors, and then escorted out, though the female guiding her remained behind for a moment to deeply thank me for my insight on the case. She also offered me a small cash reward for my help, but I declined and assured her that locking Miranda up was reward enough for me and that I don't take money that I don't feel really belongs to me... much like *she* does.

Now, I can only really hope that she doesn't cast another curse on me from prison. I mean, I *did* take those pants from Stella and toss them in the nearest dumpster, so I think I'm probably safe.

Anyway, fast forward a week, and it's actually *spring break* for all Talket County Schools.

Even though there's still five inches of snow on the ground outside my bedroom window.

However, my overly loving father, God bless his old, anxiety-ridden soul, figured it would actually be safest for him to take me away from our crime-stricken neighborhood for a few days and cruise away on a sweet, stress-free vacation.

At the Wisconsin Dells.

Yes, the dream destination of every low-income, upper-midwestern family, and the last minute getaway place of choice for both my father and myself for the past seventeen years.

So, there I was, twenty minutes after check-in to the forty bucks a night, completely non-religious themed 'Holy Day Inn', staring down a fifty square inch painting of a saucer-shaped spaceship laser-ing a picture of an American football into a field of corn stalks while laying sprawled out on a stone-stuffed mattress, listening to my father as he read a card that apparently said, 'free WiFi with network username have-a-blessed-day and password have-a-blessed-stay.'

And I guess you can probably guess by now that's something's about to go down, so this is our stop.

"Oh, isn't that just..." my dad began, staring down at the laminated but never probably cleaned index card in his hands. "Clever..."

I sat up on the edge of the bed as he stepped over to the shaded windows across the room.

"And, oh, Emma," he went on as he grabbed one side of the curtains, and then whipped them back to reveal a fantastic view of both the part of a roof and a part of the car parking lot below. "Look at *this!*"

He spun around and threw his hands out by his sides.

"I got you just about the best darn motel room on this side of the street!" he exclaimed, shaking his rusty brown mop of hair as he did so.

"It's very..." I paused, and then nodded at him. "*Luxurious*, thank you."

"Two star extravagance, baby," he agreed, and then made his way toward the bathroom behind me. "And what's in here?"

He stepped through the doorway, flipped a light switch on, and then turned out of sight.

"Oh, boy," his voice echoed out. "Someone left a floater..."

I heard a loud flush followed by a small bang, and then witnessed his return.

"Don't worry, girlfriend," he snapped his fingers, and then pointed handgun gestures at me. "I got your back"

I smiled a little.

"Thanks... dad," I said.

"Now," he picked back up, making his way over to the queen-sized bed parallel to mine. "What do you wanna do first?" He flopped down on his back. "Remember, this is only a forty-eight hour accommodation experience, so choose your choices carefully... there's some..." He paused and picked up a bundle of pamphlets next to himself.

"Horses and buggies that the Amish loaned the hotel for the weekend for pricy rides,

or... a magic sorcery show put on by some guy in a fedora and tights, or... there's a Johnny Depp impersonator signing forged autographs tomorrow morning."

"Pirate Johnny Depp or vampire Johnny Depp?" I turned to him to question.

"Mad Hatter Johnny Depp," he glanced back and answered.

"Ick," I grumbled, and then looked down to my lap. "Can't we just, like, watch TV or something instead?"

I gazed back up as my dad sat up.

"That's my gal," he smiled. "You must share some genes with me or something."

He twisted around and reached for the television remote on the night stand between us.

"Just twenty-three chromosomes," I spoke.

"Give or take," he added, and then turned the tiny flat screen TV across the way on. I glanced toward it as the screen flickered into illumination, revealing a picture of Meg Ryan sitting at a desk behind a bulky black laptop.

"Oh, Emma, *look*," dad began. "We get HBO; we really *are* on vacation!"

"Oh, wow," I commented. "A two-day subscription for the low price of just eighty bucks."

I looked back over at my father and smirked.

He slouched back on a pillow and pointed back at me.

"Be a good kid," he said. "Santa's always watching."

He moved his pointer finger from me to the television, and then gradually glanced back to it. I followed his gaze, and then watched as the screen flipped from another picture of Tom Hanks at his own bulky computer monitor to one of Meg Ryan, once again, sitting in a coffee shop. After that, it showed the two sitting across from each other, and I listened in as my father turned the volume up.

"*It sounds to me like... he's... married,*" Tom Hanks said.

I nodded, took a breath, and then pushed myself up from the bed.

"Just going to the bathroom," I announced as I rounded the end of the mattress. "No need to pause it." I stopped, and then spun back around. "Oh, wait... this isn't the DVD version you've played over twenty-six times, so you couldn't anyway."

I shrugged as my dad sluggishly glanced at me.

"Coal comes to kids who despise rom-coms," he declared, and then looked back at the TV. "Just remember that."

I nodded, and then turned back around to make my way completely into the bathroom. Once there, I slid the thin wood door shut behind me, flipped the blindingly bright ceiling light on, and then found the porcelain throne resting by the left wall. I stepped over to it, turned around, and then... you know what comes next.

I rested my chin in my hands for a few seconds, though, halfway through urination, and some intriguing loud sounds piped up from the opposite side of the wall beside me.

"*It... feels... to me... like,*" a feminine-esque voice *breathlessly* panted out. "*You're... not... married... anymore!*"

I raised a brow as I listened for more.

"*Yeah, well,*" a more manly voice began, though not exactly out of breath itself. "*My wife died eight years ago...*"

"Yikes," I mumbled.

"*Oh!*" the female exclaimed. "*I'm... so... sorry... about... your... loss...*"



"It's okay," the male picked back up, his voice still unaffected by any... outside factors. "I think she'd be proud of the man I am today."

"Y-Yes... she... w-would," the woman replied... before she began to moan excessively. "Oh... oh... oh... oh... oh... oh... oh!"

"Well, then," I mumbled, and then stood and turned to flush the toilet behind me.

"Oh... oh... Billy," the female continued. "I... think... there's... someone... over... there..."

I froze as I heard a quick two knocks on the wall between us.

"Hey... you," she went on, her voice a tad louder and clearer than previously.

"Want... to... join... us?"

I pursed my lips and turned toward the thin sheet of drywall beside me.

"Um," I began, raising my voice gradually as I did so. "No, thank you."

"Oh..." the female responded. "Kay!"

I paused as the two of them fell quiet, and then spun around to exit the bathroom. Once out, I glanced across the room to see my father slumped down in his bed, eyes closed and drool running down chin.

I twisted toward my 'Talket Middle School Turnovers' duffel bag, and then stepped over to it, snatched a couple of fresh garments from inside, and returned to the bathroom. I threw the lavender colored bikini top and bottoms as well as the black tank top and cutoff jean shorts I had grabbed onto the counter, and then closed the door behind me.

"You're... doing... it... wrong!" the wonderfully friendly female across the wall yelled out.

I proceeded to slip off my current bottoms as her counterpart replied to her.

"But I thought you said there was no wrong answer..." the man stated.

I pulled on my clean bathing suit bottoms and short cutoffs.

"Ow!" the woman yelped, and then, surprisingly, went on with full control of her breaths. "Well, splintered chopsticks definitely aren't it!"

I slipped out of my top garments, and then reached for my new ones that lay out in front of me.

"Ow, asshole!" the lady continued to scream. "Get it out!"

"Ouch," I muttered as I slipped on my bikini top and tank. "Would probably hurt my asshole, too..."

I glanced up at the mirror in front of me to adjust the halter bathing suit strings around the back of my neck, and then pulled my matted dishwater-brown locks into a high ponytail. After that, I nodded at myself for my attempt at partial decency, then turned to leave the rest area once again.

I re-entered the main component of the hotel room, and then slipped on a pair of dirty, old black Converse sneakers over my bare feet (because I had not brought any other shoes or socks at all, since I just always make sure to come prepared for every possible situation of every day). Once that task was complete, then, I walked over to my unconscious father as his throat echoed out a bubbly gargle of a sound, snatched up a pen from the end table beside him, tested its tip on the inside of my wrist, and then leaned forward to slowly trace the word 'pool' onto the top of the hand resting atop his slightly flabby belly. After that, I stepped back, observed it, and... turned my head to see that, from his direction, I had actually written 'lood' from his pinky to his thumb.

"Oops," I mouthed, and then drew a little arrow from the 'p' to the 'l'. And then another one pointing both up and down on the left of it all. And then an identical one on the right. And then I drew a line right through the middle of the word. And then another one. And another. And then I turned in place again, and then I rewrote 'pool' from his pinky to his thumb above where I had previously. And then I leaned back. And then I leaned forward. And then I wrote 'I'm at' above it. And then I leaned back, again. And then I leaned forward, again. And then I wrote 'the' in tiny letters in front of 'pool'. And then I leaned back, again. And then I leaned forward, again. And then I wrote '-Emma' on his wrist, underneath all of that. And then I leaned back. And then I leaned inward, yet again. And then I drew a smiley face next to my name. And then I leaned back, yet again. And then I turned to the side. And then... I sat the pen down.

I took a quick breath and whirled myself around. After that, I stepped past the TV showing a scene of Meg Ryan in a bookstore, grabbed both my cellphone and a room keycard from the desk beside it, made my way up to the front door, and guided myself to the burrito-scented hallway outside. It wasn't too long after I slid my personal items into my back pocket and began trotting down the corridor, however, that I encountered a young boy, circa age six, circling around himself in a black tee and orange basketball shorts.

I stopped for a moment to watch him rub his cheeks and look both to his left and right, and then spin around, groan, and throw his head into the wall between two tall doors.

"Um," I began, now stepping over to his side. "Are you okay?"

I stepped back as he turned, wiped his eyes, and glanced up at me.

"Are you lost, or..." I went on. "Do you need help, or... something?"

He nodded.

"My mom told me to go to hell," he blatantly answered me. "But... I can't find it!"

He threw his hands over his head and shrugged.

I paused for a *long* moment.

"Uh," I started. "She... *said* that... to you?"

He cocked his head to one side.

"Well," he said. "She *told* me to go to my dad, and she's always telling him to go to hell, so I think that's where I need to go in order to find him." He shook his curly dark hair. "And I can't find it."

"*Oh*," I responded, and then crouched down in front of him. "Well, that's good." I stopped and studied his mocha colored cheeks. "I mean, not *good*, really, for your dad, but... I'll help you find him, okay?"

"We have to find hell, first," he said.

I nodded.

"Okay," I replied, and then wandered my eyes to the empty hall behind him. "You know, I think I just saw Satan go *that way*."

I stood back up, and then pointed straight ahead.

"That's my grandpa!" he yelled, and then spun around.

I paused and narrowed my eyebrows, for my own sake, right before he grabbed my hand and proceeded to pull me to the middle of the corridor, where it intersected with a shorter section hallway that turned right. He stopped, then, let go of me, and peered down the other empty hallway.

"Nobody's there," he claimed.

"Yes, well," I started. "The devil's a pretty tricky fellow."

"That's my mom!" he shouted, and then spun around to face me.

I glanced up and around.

"Where?" I questioned.

"No," he grabbed my attention back. "The *devil* is my *mom*, *Satan* is my *grandpa*, and my *dad* is the *spawn* of *Satan*."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Uh huh," I began. "And... who are *you*?"

"I'm Ethan," he smiled and rocked back on his heels. "Who are you?"

I pursed my lips.

"I'm Emma," I answered. "And, today, it looks like I'm also your guardian angel."

His jaw dropped for a split second.

"*Whoa...*" he mumbled.

I smiled, and then crouched down once more in front of him.

"Yeah," I continued. "But, Ethan, tell me, do you remember... or know, even, where your room might be? Because that could actually make my job a little bit easier... and it could give me a clue as to where to send your service bill once we're done."

He shook his head.

"I don't live here," he proclaimed.

"Well," I went on. "Nobody actually *lives* in a hotel..." I paused. "Well, *permanently*, actually... I think..." I paused, again. "But, do you know where you and your parents are staying? The room number, maybe? Or, do you have one of *these*?"

I pulled out the room key I had from my pocket to showcase to him.

He looked from the key, to me, to the key, to me, to the key, to me once again.

"Nope," he said, popping his 'p' as he did so.

I searched his tiny relaxed features for a moment, then slid my card back into place and stood yet again.

"Well," I began. "That could be a problem."

I heard a tiny bang from the end of the hall, and then looked up to see a skinny pale woman in a very generic maid's uniform step out of a room with a cart full of towels and spray bottles.

I proceeded to rush over to her side.

"Excuse me, ma'am," I began as she glanced up at me, letting me take note of her extremely caked dark eyelashes and the wilting white flower in her jet black bun. "Um..." I turned and pointed to Ethan, who turned around in the place he still stood. "This boy needs help..." I gazed back to her. "Finding his parents."

"Hm," she cocked her head to one side and batted her fake lashes. "That's just too bad." She shrugged as I heard, presumably, Ethan's quick steps come up behind me. "I don't get paid for that kind of work."

"Can you help me find hell?" Ethan suddenly chimed in from beside me.

"Oh, honey," the maid chuckled out, shaking her head down at him. "You're already in it."

She took a step back, pulling her cart along with herself.

"Um," I went on, watching her as she spun away from us.

"I *am*?" Ethan gasped out.

I refrained from continuing to speak to the woman, however, and let her roam hurriedly away.

"Never mind," I whispered, and then twisted back to Ethan.

"I'm in *hell!*" he shouted out, throwing his fists above his head.

"Okay, okay," I grumbled, grabbing his hands to spin him back to me. "Let's go find someone a little more accommodating in purgatory."

I nodded, and then turned to make my way all the way down the current hall, right hall, and then around the corner of the next left hall.

"Okay!" Ethan agreed as he trotted by my side the entire way to end of the last corridor, where two tall silver doors rested, one 'up' arrow and one 'down' arrow in between them.

"I got it!" Ethan shouted as he slammed both hands into both buttons... not *once*, not *twice*, not *thrice*... but *eleven* times; I counted.

"That's good, actually, thank you," I mumbled, reaching out to protect the buttons from his fists.

He stepped back, then, just as a quiet ding sounded off from my right.

"Oh, boy!" he screeched, and I turned my head just in time to see him physically leap through the elevator doors right as they opened.

I let out a puff of air as I followed him into the empty loading area.

"I got it!" he yelled, again, now proceeding to punch absolutely every single button on the front wall.

"Oh, um, actually," I began, stepping forward to grab at his hands before he could get to the top row, which included just numbers nine and ten. "It's okay, okay?"

I pulled him back as the doors closed, but kept my hands on his shoulders as the lift lowered us down slightly.

After a few short seconds, the doors opened again, and an elderly woman with a deep blue handbag and curling gray hair shuffled into the area.

I forced a smile at her, and then let go of Ethan.

"Oh, hello there," she greeted, glancing at both him and I.

"Hi," I uttered as the doors closed once more.

It was then, though, that Ethan lunged forward and punched the remaining unlit buttons in front of us, including the five that we had *just* visited.

"Ethan," I grumbled, stepping forward to pull him back again.

The old woman giggled out beside us.

"Is he yours?" she questioned, after a moment.

I gazed over at her while the doors opened yet again.

"Um," I answered. "No, not really, no."

I shook my head as the doors admitted no one and closed back up.

"She's my guardian!" Ethan butted in, spinning around from my grip and hugging my legs.

"*Oh!*" the woman exclaimed.

I looked hurried from him to her.

"Well, actually," I started.

"God bless your soul, dear," the woman stopped me short. "The world could use more *donors* like you."

I paused and stared at her for a moment.

"And she's an angel!" Ethan shouted.

I looked from him to her, again.

"She certainly is, darling," the woman nodded at him.

I looked forward as Ethan released me and watched the elevator doors open and shut once more. And then again, with no other visitors, and then once more, when it was actually our stop.

"Well, it was nice meeting you," I urged out, right before rushing out the doorframe.

"Oh, you, too, dear," the woman parted. "You, too."

I grabbed Ethan's hand and dragged him close behind as I passed by a young couple holding hands as well as a few other small boys getting rowdy on the stained hallway carpet. I rounded a few corners in the process, but, before you know it, we had reached the front hotel lobby.

I stopped and glanced around to see a few empty sofas surrounding a fountain full of coins, a statue of a clearly-male bird-reptile hybrid-thing urinating distilled water onto them, the sliding front doors, though usually automatic, stuck in an open position, allowing a very cold breeze to abruptly blast me in the face, and the tall, wooden front desk, manned by a Caucasian male in his 30s wearing a Minnesota Vikings cap, an oversized puffy black coat, and a bright red scarf, a cheap neon sign originally reading 'Holy Day Inn Welcomes You!' hung on the wall behind him, though, unfortunately, both the 'ay' in the day and the full word 'welcomes' weren't lit as the rest of the bright blue phrase was.

I crossed my arms as another blow of cool air hit me and made my way over to the front of the desk. The man standing behind it instantly locked his eyes on me and shuddered as the wind stuck him as well.

"Sorry, I can't hand out extra towels right now, as there is a raccoon problem in the laundry room," he declared.

I stopped across from him and rubbed my shoulders.

"Uh, that's fine," I responded. "But, um..." I shot a glance over at the light drift of snow blowing in from outside. "Why is that door open?"

"Oh, because," he began, shaking his greasy dark hair. "The birds took a dump on the sidewalk again." He looked from the open doorway to me once more. "That messes with the sensors."

I nodded, slowly.

"Okay..." I began, and then looked over my shoulder to see Ethan ripping a number of large, fan-like leaves off of a plastic potted plant nearby; I rushed over to him, brushed the leaves out of his hands, and then returned to the front desk holding his hand.

"This boy," I went on, but then paused and glared down at the chest-high countertop in front of me for a moment before grabbing Ethan by his armpits and heaving him up above it. "*This* boy..." I stopped to drop him back to the floor and take a recovery breath. "I believe has lost his parents."

"Oh, dear," the man across from me muttered out.

"Though," I continued. "From the sounds of it, it may not be *such* a bad thing, but..." I glanced down at Ethan as he proceeded to *lick* the frontside of the wooden desk, then looked back up at the man and nodded. "You should probably find his parents."

"Right," he agreed, and then gazed down to the desktop between us as I grabbed my shoulders and shivered a bit again. "But, I'm afraid the phone systems are down today due to an accident in the break room, so..." He glanced back up. "I'm not sure there's much I can do with him that *you* can't."

I tilted my head to one side.

"Excuse me?" I questioned.

And, just then, the sliding doors across the way suddenly slammed their way shut.

I looked over at them for a second, then back at the man as he spoke up again.

"Look," he said. "I'd love to help, but... I get off my shift in about three hours, so I don't really have the time to."

"Um," I raised my voice slightly. "That's plenty of time to help, actually, and if you'd really *love* to help, then..." I leaned forward and dropped my hands to my sides.

"*You would help.*"

"Now, ma'am," the man replied, raising his mittened hands up in defense. "There's no need to handle this *irrationally*... Remember, this is a *holy* hotel, a *sacred* space."

"Oh, *really?*" I snapped. "You think *that was irrational?*" I turned away for a split second and emitted a quick 'pft' sound. "I could *really* show *you* irrational, buck-o." I leaned onto one hip. "But, maybe you should..." I paused, looked down at Ethan standing beside my feet, staring up at me observantly, and then reached down to cover his ears with my hands before I whipped my gaze back up at the man. "Maybe you should get your pretentious little ass cheeks out of the clouds long enough to realize that they're not really *in* them and that this place is not, in fact, *holy*, it is not *heaven*, it is not *paradise*; it's a God damn two-star hotel with a good handful of the worst user reviews on Yelp in the whole state of Wisconsin!" I stomped my foot against the hard tile floor. "And don't call me ma'am because I'm not a bitter old maid!"

The man, his eyes widened tightly, kept his hands raised and paused before replying to me.

"I *would* call security on you," he stated. "But the phones are down-"

"Oh, you would, wouldn't you?" I shot out, and then threw my hands away from Ethan's head. "You know what? I don't *need* your help." I reached one hand out for Ethan to grab. "Come on, Ethan."

He grasped my hand as I anticipated he would, and then I proceeded to direct us toward where we first came. After a few steps, however, I stopped, turned around, and made my way back up to the desk.

"Where's the pool?" I asked, my eyebrows narrowed.

The man in the absurdly puffy coat lowered one mitten, and then pointed the other in the upper-left direction.

"Thank you," I quietly spoke, and then marched off with Ethan toward the hallways ahead.

"You talk like Satan," Ethan commented. "I mean- my grandpa."

"Thanks for the compliment," I grumbled as we rounded the corner and stomped into the direction the man had suggested.

"Now," I went on, still pulling his hand. "We're gonna go to the pool, alright? And I'm gonna get in the hot tub, if there *is* one that doesn't have its jets clogged up with dead squirrel carcasses or something, and we're gonna have a dandy fine time until I figure out a way to get you back to your parents." I stopped as we reached the dead end of the

hallway, and then turned to him. "Or until *you* figure out a way to find your way home; that would be nice, too."

He nodded, and then I let go of his hand.

"Now, where *is* the pool?" I questioned, twisting to pace back down the hall a bit.

After a few steps, I stopped, again, glanced around, and then spotted a wide wooden door on the right with a plaque that read 'pool room' on it in thick black letters.

"This must be it," I said, then proceeded to step over it and push down on its door handle, though it immediately rejected me and locked up.

"You have to use your card," Ethan piped up as he jogged up to my side.

"What card?" I shot back, glancing down at him. "My *credit* card? Why would we have to *pay* to get into the pool?"

Ethan shook his head, and then reached out to gently take my hotel room keycard from my back pocket.

He stepped back and showcased it to me.

"Oh," I stated. "God... *Stella Anderson moment...*"

I reached out to take the card from him, and then inserted it into the card slot above the handle in front of us.

"Who's Stella Anderson?" Ethan asked as I pushed the door down on the doorknob.

I looked over at him and replied before I swung it forward.

"A demon in disguise."

I looked forward once more as we both passed by the doorway.

And then I saw a handcuffed man tied to a white column with a sock in his mouth, a pasty white woman dressed in a night black, floor-length gown with a black top-hat covering her also jet black hair next to him holding a Swiss army knife to his neck, about ten other darkly dressed men and women all sitting in chairs in front of them across the room, and absolutely no pools or hot tubs in sight... other than the one pool table resting to the right of them, all covered in tan sticks and multicolored balls ready for a round of billiards.

"Oh my God," I muttered out. "I don't think this is the right room..."

I shook my head and spun around, only to find that, somehow, two tall men in blood-stained white suits had suddenly appeared in my way.

"*Ah!*" I shouted as I jumped back a step from them.

"Mommy!" I heard Ethan *joyfully* yell out.

"What?" I spat, and then turned to see him sprint over to the woman prepared to decapitate the hostage man across the way.

"Oh, Ethan!" the woman cheered back, now turning away to kneel down and embrace him.

"Oh, God..." I whispered.

"Mom, I found my guardian angel!" he went on.

"*Oh?*" the woman stood back up and threw her hands to her hips, still holding the switched knife blade.

"Yeah, she's right over there!" Ethan shouted, and then turned to point directly at *me*. "Her name's Emma!"

"Is that so?" the woman speculated as she followed his gaze.

She glared at me behind dark brown eyes and heavy eyeliner, and, after a few moments, I made the tiniest waving gesture at her. After that, she stomped her heavy-

heeled boots against the tile floor and made her way slowly, but surely, all the way up to me.

"Emma, huh?" she growled, looking me carefully up and down from about a foot away from my face.

I nodded very slightly.

She leaned forward and cocked her head to the side.

"Guardian angel, huh?" she snickered.

I began to nod, then stopped myself.

"Well, actually," I began, leaning a tad back from her heavy breaths. "Not really, no, I mean, I wasn't, like, 'sent from above' or anything... well, maybe, like, sent from above *here* as in, kind of, a higher floor of this building, but, um... I was really... just trying to help..."

"I don't like angels," the woman breathed, and then held up the end of her knife to make a swirling gesture. "None of us here do."

"Oh..." I responded. "Well, then, I should probably just be going..."

I proceeded to spin around, but she seized me and whipped me back.

"No, I think you should stay," she declared. "And show us..." She paused, keeping her knife up beside her cheek. "What an angel you *really* are."

I blinked at the knife blade a few times.

"Um," I started. "I'm not really an angel, though, so..." I glanced back at her expressionless expression. "I mean, I've had *quite a few* run-ins with the *po-po* the past few months, if you know what I mean... oh, and just last week, I actually *broke and entered* into a mean girl's house and stole her pants, so I'm definitely *not* an angel by, actually, *any* definition."

"Fine," the woman scoffed. "Then let's see you prove it." She turned back around. "Come here."

I watched her step over to the side of the onlooking seated crowd, and then carefully rubbed my palms together in front of my waist and followed her command.

"Now," she went on, stopping directly to the left of the wide-eyed, pale man bound to the column. "I want you finish our work for us." She spun around to face me, and then outstretched her knife toward me.

"Um," I responded, locking my eyes onto the glaring silver blade, now noticing the smallest traces of dark brown blood spots lining it. "And... that... would... be?"

The woman pulled back the knife, and my eyes followed it as she slowly leaned it up against the man's chin. I studied his expression as he squeezed his eyes shut and moaned a muffled groan.

In the process of my observations, then, I, of course, felt an all too familiar jerk grab me from deep inside my gut.

I swallowed a mouthful of thick saliva as the woman turned back to me.

"I believe you know what," she grumbled, and then returned the knife into my direction.

My stomach silently grumbled and vibrated.

"Um," I started.

"Just take it!" an unfamiliar masculine voice shouted out from behind me.

I jumped in place, and then whipped my head over my shoulder to see the faces of every individual of the group glaring at me with their dark eyes, all plastered with



makeup. I looked forward once again as I felt the tug of the woman on my right hand, and then froze as she physically put the knife handle in my hand for me.

And then my stomach took a belly flop underneath my skin.

"Oh," I mumbled, throwing my free hand overtop my abdomen. "I, um, I think... I have to go to the bathroom..."

"You're not getting out that easily," the woman shook her head at me.

My stomach churned, again.

"But, I-"

"Either stab him or I'll stab you!" the woman shouted, cutting me short, before turning to the crowd behind my back. "Now, come on, guys, let's give her a little boost..." She took a breath, looked back at me, smirked, and then began to whisper something completely foreign-sounding into my direction. "*Et bass servat currit, currit, et currit, currit, et-*"

I jumped under my skin and momentarily closed my eyes as the rest of the group suddenly joined in.

*"Lets 'adepto coepi per ha, lets 'adepto coepi per huc..."*

I shot my eyes back open as I felt another punch to the gut, and then I shook my head at the chanting woman in front of me.

"I don't," I began, though I stopped to quickly gulp back a burning, acidic feeling. "I don't know what you're saying..."

"I don't care!" she stepped her forehead closely up to mine to shriek as the group continued their ritualistic words, repeating *'lets 'adepto coepi per ha'* behind us. "Just kill him, *now!*"

I didn't even need another churn to let it all loose after that; her screams were enough to prompt my brewing vomit chunks of beef tacos and salsa covered rice to spew from my mouth... to hers.

I bent over and stumbled back as my stomach relieved itself from the woman's nose to her knees, and then stepped back as she shouted out.

"*You!*" was all she could manage before I spun around and straightened out my back.

"Sorry!" I yelled, and then leaped hurriedly away.

"Get her!" the woman continued right after I pushed past one of the suddenly speechless, standing bystanders and charged for the closed door ahead.

"Is she leaving!" she went on as I actually rammed my way into the hallway, though the knife I held got caught in the door handle as I fled. "I can't see!"

I let go of the knife pretty quickly, though, and then spun to the left to take off down the long hall ahead. I heard a loud clammer of noise behind me before a different, deep booming voice yelled at me.

*"Get back here!"*

"I don't think so," I mumbled as I sprinted past the main lobby, glancing only momentarily at the desk man while he seemed to be actually clipping his toe nails on the desktop. I rolled my eyes away, then, as I ran to the next perpendicular hallway ahead. After that, I rounded its corner, and then charged into the first opened doorway on the right.

I stopped after I had passed it, and then glanced up to quickly take notice in the medium-sized stage ahead, a spotlight shining on a youthful, baton-twirling girl in a one-

piece red bathing currently on it. In front of that was about thirty rows or so of auditorium-style seats, a little over half of them filled with spectators.

It should also be noted, probably, that the lights were all lowered and "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Nirvana was playing softly in the background.

"*Excuse me, miss,*" I heard a soft voice abruptly pipe up from beside me.

I jumped in place a tad, but then glanced toward it to see a short man in a suit beginning to close the propped-open door behind me. I took a breath, then, and rubbed my chest as he turned back to me, revealing a large black microphone headset over his light red hair.

"Oh, contestants go back there," he said to me, and then pointed a black pen behind my ponytailed head.

I followed his gesture to see a long path between where I stood and a curtain-covered doorframe to the side of and slightly below the stage area as well as a pink cardboard stand directly in front of me that read 'Tri-County Beauty Pageant Qualifiers Today!'.

I looked back at the man and nodded.

"Thank you," I said, right before he nodded back and let me turn around to trot around the long line of seats to the concealed doorway straight ahead. Once there, I held my hands out to brush away the heavy black curtains, and then entered a whole new world of chatty, partial naked girls and choking clouds of hairspray, perfume, and only god knows what else.

"*Next three performers get ready, please!*" some woman shouted out amidst the chaos.

I stepped into the middle of it all, passing two makeup vanities, the fancy kind with the big light bulbs all around the mirrors, with two young women hurriedly applying lipstick and blush in front of them, a group of younger, middle school-aged girls clustering together in their swimsuits beside them, and an older, more clothed woman chasing an infant in a tankini beside them. After taking in all of that, I continued forward and slightly to the left, where I took note of a short staircase leading up to what I imagined to be the stage area.

"*Next bikini chickadee, where might you be?*" another female's voice yelled out.

Immediately after hearing that, a hand grabbed at my right shoulder from behind, and then forcibly whipped me around.

"Way to wait until the last minute, huh?" a short Latina woman in a black button up and a headset extremely identical to the one the man from earlier had had strapped to his scalp.

Before I could even reply to her, she grabbed at my shirt and jerked it up over my chin, revealing my purple bikini halter underneath.

"Um," I muffled out from underneath it.

"I hope your act is readier than your look," she commented as she popped my top off, tossed it to the floor, and then reached down to unsnap the button on my shorts.

"I don't," I began. "*Have... an... act...*"

The woman laughed as she jerked my pants down and away from my swimsuit bottoms.

"Better think quick, then," she said, dropping my shorts, and then spinning me around to step out of them while she yanked the ponytail holder out of my hair.

"Hey," I shot out, glancing back at her. "That was there for a reason."

She wrinkled her nose as she attempted to run a hand through the tangled nest resting on my head.

"*Ick*," she muttered after her fingers found their way into a tight-knit knot. "I guess so..."

"*Ow!*" I sputtered as she ripped her hand the rest of the way through.

"*Oh, oh*," the woman tapped my shoulder. "It's your turn; you're on!"

"No, wait," I urged as she grabbed both my shoulders and pushed me straight for the steps ahead.

"It's okay; you'll do great," she went on, now forcing me to stumble up the stairs.

"But," I started back. "I'm not a contestant!"

Ignoring me, the woman shoved me forward with a surprising amount of strength, causing me to stagger onto the hardwood black stage, past the side-draped curtains and random boxes marking the edge of no return.

I tottered to a stop, and then looked to the left, where a quiet crowd sat, staring. In front of them, past the blaring bright stage lights, was a table set up for four middle-aged individuals: one male and three female, each of them having their own microphone and bottled water on top of the desk they shared. And, beyond the rows of the crowd, I caught glimpse of the witch-attired woman who was supposedly Ethan's mother standing and glaring at me from the doorway of the auditorium, a few of her, I guess, *colleagues* stepping into the area behind her.

I returned my gaze to stage below me, breathed out a gulp, and then made my way quickly to the center of it. After that, I threw my arms down by my exposed thighs and looked up to face the four sitting not too far in front of me.

"*Ahem*," the man sitting at the table began. "Name, please?"

I studied him slowly as I raised my hands to my hips.

"Emma Lenford," I declared.

He blankly glared at me, and then gestured toward my right, where I turned to see exact same man from the front step out from behind the curtain to hand me a black microphone.

"Oh," I muttered as I took it. "Thanks."

I nodded at him as he walked back off-stage, and then turned back to the other man with my free hand still on my hip.

"Emma Lenford," I said into the mic, wincing a bit afterward at the booming echo it gave my name throughout the room.

"Okay," the man responded into his own mic, and then glanced down at a paper in front of himself for a long few moments.

In the meantime, I pushed a bright smile at the rest of the crowd, gazing at the back for a split second to see the witch woman begin to step toward the backstage area, her minions following close behind.

"Well, Emma Lenford," the man piped back up. "You're not on the roster."

I returned my gaze to him as he glared back from behind his thin-rimmed reading glasses.

"Well," I responded, holding my microphone slightly farther away from my chin this time. "I can assure you that I did pay the five twenty-five dollar entry fee, so don't worry too much about your *lists*."

"But, Miss Lenford," one of the women at the table chimed in.

"Here's some ID if you don't believe me," I butted back in, now reaching into my back pocket to pull out and toss at them my hotel room key, smiling all the while. After that, I glanced over my left shoulder to see the familiar Latina showing me what looked to be a CD as she hurried up to the side of some backstage machinery beside the staircase.

"Now," I shot my head back at the audience. "If we could just get my backtrack to start, then all will be... as amusing as this hotel is holy."

Immediately after my words left my mouth, then, a futuristic sounding keyboard began to play, and I struggled to keep the smile on my face before the beat dropped into an almost disco feeling sort of song.

Still, though, I didn't recognize the track and merely bounced one hip to the beat a bit until the words began... with the voice of Cher.

*"No matter how hard I try..."*

I began to bob my head, still standing in place, as I looked down to see the witch's gang entering the backstage area below me and to the side.

*"You keep pushing me aside..."*

I flickered my eyes back to the stagnant audience.

*"And I can't break though... There's no talking to you..."*

My smile slowly faded.

*"So sad that you're leaving; Takes time to believe it..."*

I stopped bobbing my head and studied the blank expressions of the four sitting ahead of me.

*"But after all is said and done..."*

I took a deep breath and threw my left hand down to my waist.

*"You're going to be the lonely one..."*

I turned to the left and saw the witch suddenly standing at the edge of the stairs, arms crossed, her knife slightly hidden in one hand.

*"Oh..."*

And then I took a two hundred-seventy degree spin back to the audience, threw my fist in the air, and began to elaborately lip-sync into my microphone.

*"Do you believe in life after love!"*

I bobbed my head with the next three beats, and then pulled my fist down to my neck as I pretended to sing the next line.

*"I can feel-something-inside-me-say... I really don't think you're strong enough, no!"*

I threw my pointer finger out at the crowd.

*"Do you be-"* I threw my finger back, over my ear, tilted my head to the side, and closed my eyes. *"-Lieve in life after love!"*

With the next four beats, I spun around, and then took two sharp steps forward; I threw my hand over my stomach for the next line.

*"I can feel something inside me say..."*

I moved my hand from my abdomen to my collarbone and lifted my elbow up.

*"I really don't think you're strong enough, no!"*

I thrust my fist up into the air yet again, and then spun to the left to see two of the witch woman's men followers, both in black dress shirts and pants, suddenly bolting onto the stage in front of her.

"There's my backup dancers!" I yelled into the mic, right before I whipped myself back to stage right.

*"What am I supposed to do?"* Cher went on as I rushed myself up to the very edge of the center area of the stage. *"Sit around and wait for you?"*

And then I proceeded to physically hurl myself into the air, leaping from the stage onto the tabletop of the four individuals quite a few feet ahead.

I heard a few gasps as well as a few woos and whistles from the crowd as I stuck the landing, balanced both hands above my head, and flashed a fast smile.

*"Well I can't do that; There's no turning back..."*

I lowered the mic to my chin once more, keeping my opposite hand above my head as I continued my lip-syncing.

*"I need time to move on..."*

I lowered my hand to my waist and began to pop my hip in perfect time with the beat.

*"I need love to feel strong..."*

I turned to the left side of the crowd and bent my knees slightly.

*"Cause I've had time to think it through..."*

I moved my palm to hover over my chest.

*"And maybe-"* I pointed my index finger at myself. *"I'm too good-"* I turned it at the crowd. *"For you."*

I proceeded to hop up and slam both my sneaker bottoms onto the 'roster' paper on the desk below me, and then threw my fist up once more.

*"Oh!"*

I turned hurriedly back to the stage, saw the two men standing still, merely staring at me, and then spun back to the audience.

I slapped my hand down to my side, dropped to my knees, and threw my head back on its hinges, hovering the mic right above it.

*"Do you believe in life after love!"*

I tossed my head back up and reached out to touch the chin of the woman in front of me, who had previously spoken back to me, her eyes widened and her eyebrows heightened.

*"I can feel something inside me say..."* I brought my hand back to a fist over my heart. *"I really don't think you're strong enough, no!"*

I hopped right back up to my feet, shaking the table a bit underneath me in the process, and switched the microphone to my left hand in order to throw my right hand straight out to my side.

*"Do you believe in life after love!"*

I waved my hands back and forth with each beat preceding the next lyric, and then turned to step slowly to the left with each word.

*"I can feel something inside me say..."* I halted and pointed down at the skeptical face of the middle-aged man sitting below me. *"I really don't think you're strong enough, no!"*

I glanced back up at the crowd, and then spoke a few of my own words into the mic.

*"Everybody on your feet or fist pump or something if you like Cher!"*

I spun back toward the stage as a lengthier interlude than normal played, and then jumped down from the table, ran over to the first of two aisles running through the audience seats, and swayed forward with the music while I spotted a little girl of about three or four dancing in her mother's lap in the front row.

"Yeah, she likes Cher!" I yelled, pointing at the girl and nodding.

After that, I glanced into the other direction, where a man of about eighty with a long white beard was standing in front of his seat, gently swinging his hips.

"Oh, *he* likes Cher!" I commented, gesturing to him as well.

I looked ahead as a few more forty year old women, each with heavy nose bandages applied to their faces, stood up in a group, wooed, and began clapping their hands to the beat.

"And they really like Cher, too!" I shouted, pointing over at them with a few more steps. After that, I slowed to a stop, raised a hand to one hip, and continued to bob my head along with everyone else.

"I don't know why the words aren't playing, now!" I remarked. "But, I guess we can-"

And then I stopped, because the lyrics suddenly continued.

*"Well I know that I'll get through this!"*

"Oh, okay," I muttered out, and then turned around to both run up to and trot back onto stage via the mini staircase on the near left. Once I had gotten back up, I took one look at the two frozen men still standing in the center of the area before shooting a look back at the crowd for the next lip-synced line.

*" 'Cause I know that I am strong!"*

And then I turned back to the two silent men, rushed up to the side of the nearest one, grabbed his black gloved hand, and spun myself into his arm.

I threw my head to the side a little and lowered my eyes to the four at the table.

*"I don't need you anymore!"*

I twirled myself out of his arm, and then into the one of the other man.

*"Oh, I don't need you anymore!"*

I spun myself out, and then hip-bumped the same guy before tossing the mic back to my right hand and shooting my left above my head.

*"Oh, oh, I don't need you anymore!"*

I trotted around to the opposite side of the opposite guy, then bumped him in a similar manner.

*"No, I don't need you anymore!"*

I hurriedly stepped in between both of them, did a quick three-sixty, and then pointed directly at the center of the crowd ahead as the beat broke itself down.

*"Do you believe in life after love?"* I brought my left hand back and looked toward it with the next few echoes; in the process, I saw the witching woman shake her head and grit her teeth at me from behind the curtains. *"After love... after love... after love..."*

I snapped my head forward once more.

*"I can feel something inside me say..."*

I glanced the opposite direction, and then saw a number of her similarly dressed followers glaring me down in the same way.

Still, I shot my gaze back to center and pushed a smile with the next line.

*"I really don't think you're strong enough, no!"*

And then, as the beat picked back up, I turned to the left and half-skipped away from the two quiet men.

*"Do you believe in life after love!"*

I halted when I saw the woman of evil throw her hands down and march herself into the lights of the stage.

I then turned back to the crowd and began to musically wave my hand above my head before rushing back to the right.

*"I can feel something inside me say... I really don't think you're strong enough, no!"*

I stopped, again, when I noticed the mob across the floor advance toward me as well.

I turned back to the left, and then saw the woman push the two men from the center of the floor aback.

After that, I faced the crowd once more and spoke above the next line of tune.

"Give it up for the rest that finally showed up!"

I heard a few echoes of cheers in response, and then turned back to the approaching woman as she reached both her fists out to me, her knife in one of them.

*"I can feel something inside me say..."*

I then grabbed at her hands, spun the both of us around, and, somehow, yanked the knife blade from her grip, though I'm pretty sure it gave me a pretty deep nick in the process.

*"I really don't think you're strong enough, no!"*

I stepped back as she stumbled to the side before kneeling down and tossing the knife back at the empty stage left area, and then ultimately spinning back to the crowd to continue my performance.

*"Do you believe in life after love!"*

I then rushed forward, to the edge of the stage, and leaped onto the front table once more. After I made the jump, I popped my head up, threw my throbbing cut hand over my heart, tapped my foot to the music, and continued on.

*"I can feel something inside me say... I really don't think you're strong enough, no!"*

I turned back to the stage and drummed my hand on one hip as I watched the woman and her people all glare at me, though now unmoving.

*"Do you believe in life after love!"*

I spun back around, and then thrust my hurting fist straight up.

*"Do you believe in life after love!"*

Right after that, the music cut out with a dramatic boom sound, and then many members of the crowd cheered and clapped out, the majority of them jumping up to their feet.

"Thank you," I said into the mic, flashing them all a smile. "Thank you..."

I looked down at the speechless four sitting under my feet as the audience cooled down.

"And, now, just so everybody knows," I continued, glancing back up. "Those aren't really my backup dancers..." I paused to throw my now-bleeding palm out to my side. "They're actually all killer occultists trying to murder me!"

A number of screams emitted from the crowd, and I peered over my shoulder to see the costumed woman now standing by the front curtain, aiming to chuck her knife right at me.

"Um," I started, and then heard the sounds of about a hundred shoe bottoms squealing against the floor. "Yeah, let's all get out, now."

I dropped the mic onto the desk through all the noise, hopped to the ground, ducked down, and fled into the movement of people all rushing toward the back doors.

And I got the hell out.



## Don't Let Your Guard Down

I don't think one can get 'What Would Miss Congeniality Do?' any more spot-on than I can.

After the whole cult chase back at the Dells, the Holy Day Inn politely requested I choose to stay at a different 'resort' the next time I came to town. I'm not completely sure why, though, because right after I announced to everyone in a room with the capacity of one hundred fifty persons, seventy-eight percent full, that a psychotic woman dressed as a coven's head master was out to murder me from the shadows my entire unexpected four minute lip-sync performance and pretty much all people with ears stormed for the door, a courageous few security guards who had been eyeing me with the audience the whole time tackled her and her few other violent followers, though the majority of them, I guess, surrendered at the sight of tranquilizers and immediately disbanded from the group, which, for the record, was afterward confirmed to be a true, active practicing *cult*.

So, actually, I kind of saved a lot of lives that day... including my own as well the man later found tied and silenced in the 'pool room'.

But, it doesn't matter much what the hotel management had to say about my presentation, because two out of the four *judges* invited me to join the next leg of the competition, even though I wasn't initially included on the *roster*. However, neither one of them was the sole male of the group, and they both encouraged me to try again just for the sake of 'recovering from pageant-associated trauma.'

I declined their offer, and they gave me a pen with a mini plastic tiara attached to the clicker on the end.

And, after it was all over, I got back to my hotel room before my father even stirred awake.

Bonus points.

Now, the rest of the trip went fairly smoothly, and I managed to return home without any army knife wounds. But then I got a voicemail from an unexpected number... the county jail's- inmate extension.

Someone wanted a visit *from* me.

Someone wouldn't speak to anyone else *but* me.

Someone tried to *kill* me on one occasion and assumed I'd be willing to go visit that certain someone before that certain someone gave me that certain someone's certain apology.

And there's more to it than that.

But you probably need to know who it is begging my appearance first.

So, here I sit, in Talket County's go-to hang out joint, the nearest holding jail, across from a certain someone with nothing but a wooden desktop and a thick sheet of glass between us.

"So, um," I began, sweeping a chunk of bangs behind one ear. "You... wanted to see me?"

I glanced up at Grayson as he leaned forward, the elbows of his bright orange jumpsuit resting on the table.

He paused, and then nodded.

"Yeah, Em, I..." he replied. "I need to talk to you..."

I nodded a little.

"About your devious plot to hunt down and shoot Kyle Ermings in the middle of English class on a cloudy February morning?" I asked, and then tilted my head to the side. "Or is it something else? Because it's kind of too late to run those plans by me now."

"No, Emma, listen, please," he begged, glanced down at his fingertips. "I called you in here... because... I thought only *you* would understand me..."

I paused.

"We'll see," I grumbled as he flickered his golden brown eyes back up at me.

"I know what I did was," he immediately picked back up. "A bit... *unexpected*..."

"Uh, *yeah*," I spat out.

"But," he continued. "I did it... for... because..."

I propped my fist under my chin and studied his shaggy beige hair and tiny traces of darker facial scruff while he struggled with his words.

"I did it, Em, because..." he looked down for a long, *long* moment.

"The Facebook page?" I butted in, keeping my cheek cupped in my palm.

"No," Grayson shook his head back up at me. "That was... just... the... just..."

He trailed off, again.

I let out a slight sigh and brought my hand down to my lap.

"Well," I began. "If you're not going to start talking any time soon, then I'll just-"

"No, wait," Grayson shot out, now throwing his hands up in defense. "I'm sorry, Emma, you deserve to know..."

I stared back at him for a moment.

"I *do*," I nodded. "Okay, then *you* deserve thirty seconds to spit out whatever you have on the tip of your tongue before *I* get up and leave."

He then looked me quickly over.

"Okay, okay," he agreed, glancing yet again from me to his hands. "It's just... the Facebook page... was all apart of..." He kept his head down, but still glared up at me behind his narrowed eyebrows. "My 'plan'."

I pursed my lips and waited for more.

"I made it myself," he explained. "To frame Kyle... for, you know, the... *pictures*... that were on there." He paused. "And they weren't mine, either, just so you know... I got them from *Pornhub*..."

I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah, well," I said. "*I* could have guess that." I stopped. "I mean, that *you* made the page... but also about the pictures, too, probably."

"Yeah, but," he continued. "I made a fake page of someone else... and then I made it look like it was posting... pictures and rumor and stuff about *me*... and then I befriended just about everyone in school besides Kyle and his friends on it, so it would seem more believable to *be* them."

"Rookie move," I commented. "And, anyway, you never friended *me* on it."

Grayson shrugged.

"I didn't really want my best *girl* friend to see *my* supposed dick pics."

I raised a brow.

"Valid argument..." I mumbled.

I then looked above Grayson's head as a security guard guided another inmate in an orange jumpsuit past the quiet, open doorway behind where he sat.

"And, Emma," he grabbed my attention back. "I know I shouldn't have actually *hurt* Kyle..."

"Or threatened him, for that matter," I added.

"Well..." he began to counter.

"Grayson," I snapped, and then leaned forward to squint a little at him. "What on earth did Kyle even ever *do* to you?"

Grayson lowered his eyes to the bottom of the glass pane separating us.

"I... I don't..." he muttered out. "I don't wanna... talk about that..."

"*What!*" I raised my voice an enormous amount and slammed my palms against the desktop in front of myself. Immediately following that, though, I snapped my head over my shoulder, glanced at where one of the guards that let me into the tiny cubicle of a room was standing, beside the door, chomping down a blueberry muffin, watching something or other on his iPhone screen, listening intently to whatever was playing in his bulky white headphone, supposedly 'monitoring' our conversation, and then looked slowly back at Grayson.

I lowered my tone and relaxed my elbows.

"I'm sorry," I breathed out. "But, again, *what?* You don't want to 'talk about *that?*'"

"Emma," Grayson responded, shaking his head and lowering his hands to somewhere below his side of the desk. "I'm sorry, but I just... can't... tell you..."

"Uh huh, yeah," I rolled my eyes.

"Emma," he shot out. "You... just... wouldn't understand..."

I crossed my arms and leaned back in my seat.

"Oh, so," I began, glaring back at him. "You called me in here to *talk* to me, because only *I* would understand, and now you're spinning right back around, counteracting yourself, kind of like a really bad PR director would." I paused and tapped a finger on my elbow. "Too bad no big advertising company will want to hire you in after all of this is over."

Grayson paused and searched me a moment.

"I know, I know," he began, eventually. "I... maybe... I should... just... tell you..."

I leaned forward and clasped my hands on top of the countertop.

"Um," I began, cocking my head to the side. "Yeah, maybe, since I'm... like, *here.*" I pursed my lips, and then went on. "And, by that, I mean, really..." I brought my head back to center. "Both physically *and* mentally."

I distractedly looked above his hair as another bulky, older man in a prison uniform was guided through the doorway behind him. After that, though, I shook my head back to Grayson and attempted to reach my hand across the table to him, though I actually ended up punching it into the bottom of the thick glass between us instead.

"Ouch," I mumbled, looking down as I now shook my wrist out. After a quick second, though, I returned it to my lap, and then looked back up at Grayson to continue speaking.

"I mean, *Gray*... you're still my friend, right? And, if you are, you can tell me *anything.*" I paused as he nodded in agreement. "So, please, if you can help me understand why you did what you did... just *tell* me."

"You're right," he spoke out, and then sighed a tad. "Okay..." He flickered his eyes from me to his lap. "So, I... I had this *dream*..."

I remained still and attentive as he stopped for a moment.

"And, in it..." he went on, closing his eyes. "I went to my fridge..." He stopped, again, and looked back up at me. "The mini one in my closet..."

I nodded, slowly.

"And I wanted to get an ice cream sandwich from it..." he continued, glancing back down to the desktop. "But... there weren't any left... and then, suddenly, my whole closet disappeared... and then Kyle appeared..." He pierced his eyes right into mine.

"*Eating the last* ice cream bar."

He shook his head as I narrowed my brows at him a little.

"Is that... *it*?" I asked.

"No, there's more," Grayson answered, now resituating in his seat and bringing his hands back into view above the table.

"Oh, good," I mumbled, now slipping one of my own hands under my chin, again.

"After that night, I just..." he went on. "I couldn't look at him the same... and with all the jokes he would make in our classes... both English, with you, and World History on my own..." His voice trailed off, and he shook his head yet again. "I just couldn't take it, *his words*... every laugh he got back was like a punch to the gut..."

I squinted at him and tilted my head to the left.

"And then," his tone abruptly switched to one of a low growl as he glared up at me once more. "I saw him eating an ice cream sandwich during lunch the day before... *you know*... and I just lost it."

I paused for a long moment and studied his menacing expression.

"Is *that* it?" I quietly questioned.

"Well," he commented, looking to the side momentarily. "Kind of, but... I just kept feeling like... the dream was more of a *sign* or something..."

"A sign for *what*?" I butted in.

"Like," he began to answer, now looking back at me. "He was going to take something *bigger* from me..."

"Like," I shot back, putting my hand down. "Um, *what*?"

"I don't know, Emma," he spat out before leaning forward. "But I had to stop him before he took it."

I paused.

"Right," I mumbled, glancing down at my dirty, broken short 'nails'. "Or..." I gazed back up at him. "Maybe..." I shrugged a bit. "It was really *just* a dream."

I nodded for emphasis, and then he closed his eyes and began to rub the bridge of his nose.

"No, Emma," he grumbled. "You just don't understand..."

I paused as he continued to rub the corners of his eyes.

"You're right," I plainly agreed. "And I don't even have a witty response to that."

I shook my head to the side for a moment, and then glanced back as he opened his eyes at me once more.

"You know, Gray," I began, again. "I honestly don't think you're acting like yourself at all anymore." I paused. "I don't even know if I can call you *Gray*, Gray. You're not the

Gray I know; You're just Grayson now." I watched his eyes trail down to our desk. "Gray was kind of dumb, but he wasn't *stupid*. And, frankly, Grayson, this is all *really* idiotic."

"Okay, Emma, that's enough," he said.

"No, Grayson," I stopped him. "Actually, I don't think it's enough at all. You've been acting... *demonic*. I mean, what is it going to take to make you realize what you've been doing? Do I need to call in a priest? Do I need to exorcise the stupidity from your body? Give you some sage tea? Because, Grayson, something's gotten into you, and it needs to get the hell out."

Grayson glared up at me, stone-faced and all.

"And *my* Gray would have been laughing right now, but it seems *you're* not, so-

"Emma," he stopped me short. "Of all people, of the few friends I actually have, I thought *you* were going to understand... I mean, there's a few people *you* really don't like, too."

"Oh, yeah, *right*," I started back. "Uh huh, like who on earth would I hate so much with a smoldering passion that I would want to shoot them to near death, huh?"

"*Stella Anderson*," Grayson shot out.

I paused, and then smiled, just a tad.

"Yeah, well, people change," I stated, and then cocked my head toward my shoulder. "You won't believe this, but she's actually my ride over here and back... well, once she finishes her manicure at *Hand Jobs* down the street, *then* she'll be my ride home." I paused. "It's been a long few weeks..."

"Yeah, I don't really believe that..." Grayson claimed. "Why would you ever want to even *talk* to her?"

"You just wouldn't understand," I shot back with a tiny smirk.

He glared back at me for a long, *long* moment.

"Well," he cleared his throat. "As long as you're not frolicking around with Kyle..." He leaned back in his metal folding chair and relaxed his shoulders. "How... *is*... Kyle... do you know?"

"He's recovering very well from the gunshot wound in his lower left extremity, if that's what you're wondering," I answered. "And he's dropped out of school for the rest of the semester, no thanks to you, but he's very much alive and healthy. Physically, at least; he may be mentally scarred for quite some time, though, as may a few others who witnessed the same incident." I raised one brow at him. "I, however, have learned a great deal lately of how to not..." I paused. "Give a damn about the stupid and sometimes dangerous traps that I fall into." I paused, again, and then shrugged. "But that's just if you were wondering how *I* was doing, though."

"Oh, *I'm sorry*, Emma," Grayson grumbled, avoiding my eye contact. "How *are* you doing? I assumed you were fine, but..."

I glanced over his head before he continued and noticed another tall inmate walking beside a uniformed female guard.

"I guess just seeing you be your sarcastic, comedic self wasn't a big enough clue for me..."

I watched the individual in the orange jumpsuit swing a lightly browned ponytail back and forth as *she*, I assumed, stepped beside the guard behind Grayson's back.

"But, really..." he went on. "Kyle *is* okay?"

I propped my chin into my fist, though keeping my eyes on the back of the prisoner as she slowly stepped around the corner ahead.

"Yes..." I groaned out.

As soon as my words left my mouth, though, the inmate suddenly halted, spun around, and faced me.

And then, low and behold, I found myself staring directly at *Miranda Lively* as she shot a smirk into my direction.

"Damn..." I heard Grayson curse, though I, at the same time, raised my eyebrows and blinked a few times at the sight to be held over his head.

"*Emma...*" I witnessed Miranda mouth toward me.

"I," I began to spit out, looking hurriedly back to Grayson as she began to chuckle a little a short distance from behind him. "I have to go."

I shot up to stand and snatched my purple cross-body purse from the back of my seat.

"Why?" Grayson questioned. "Is your *ride* here already?"

"No," I shot back, now turning to the side to throw my purse strap over my shoulder. "Well, maybe, I don't know; I'll call an Uber if I have to, but..."

I glanced up and spotted Miranda, again, as she ran her index finger across her throat and shook her head at me.

I froze for a second, and then watched the guard beside her yank her back toward the hallway ahead.

"Are you really *that* upset with me, Emma?" Grayson pulled my attention back.

"I don't know, Grayson," I looked down at him and replied. "But probably, *yeah*, now that I see you have no remorse for what you did, and you can be assured that *you* won't see *me* back in *this* place again..." I paused and stepped back on one heel. "Unless, of course, I get busted for selling cocaine or stealing booze from the closest Red Lobster, but, you know what?" I leaned forward for a moment. "That's not going to happen. You know why?" I watched Grayson blankly blink at me, and then stomped my foot.

"Because *I'm* not a criminal!"

I leaned back and glared up at the back of Miranda's head as she flipped a bird into my direction.

"So," I went on, now looking back down at Grayson. "Good luck in here, kid; I hope they treat you justly." I nodded, and then took a step back as I glanced up at Miranda and her guide, who were both now turning a corner far ahead. "And goodbye and good riddance!"

I spun around on my toes, and then stepped up to the side of the guard in the doorway to small area of space, who was still distractedly staring down at his smartphone.

"Emma, wait!" Grayson yelled behind my back.

I tapped the uniformed guard gently on his shoulder, and then waited for him to lift one side of his headphones from his ear.

"We're done in here," I proclaimed to him, though his eyes were still glued to his mobile device.

He carefully lowered his headphones back down, and then turned his hand into a thumbs-up gesture in front of my face.

"*Em!*" Grayson yelled one more time before I darted through the cracked doorway nearby.

Without looking back, then, I trotted quickly down the corridor and around a large police desk area. Before I could continue to charge through the set of doors leading to the front entrance area, however, a voice piped up from close behind.

"*Oh, wait, Miss Lenford,*" it spoke out.

I halted and turned slowly around to see a guard I had spoken to earlier, before I had begun to converse with Grayson, standing behind his own computer desktop area, holding one hand out toward me.

"I need to check your purse, again, before you leave," he said. "I'm sorry, it's just protocol."

"Oh, right," I blurted out, now stepping over to the frontside of his desk as I lifted my handbag over my shoulders once more. "That's fine; sorry, I guess I tried to sneak out suspiciously, didn't I?"

"It's alright," he warmly chuckled as he took my bag from my hands, over the mostly empty desktop. "How did it go in there?"

"Well," I replied, leaning onto one hip as he lowered my purse to the table. "I've had better times explaining atomic theory to my great aunt, so..."

He laughed again as he pried the bag slightly open.

"Not good, then, I'm guessing," he commented.

"Not even close," I shot back, staring down as he reached a few fingers into my purse. "And I can assure you that you won't find anything but tampons and some sticky residue of a once-was Mountain Dew chapstick in the bottom of that."

He chuckled quietly as he fished through the items inside for a moment, and then fell completely silent.

I gradually glanced from his hand to his face, and then noticed that his smile had dramatically drooped all of a sudden.

"Everything... *okay*, there?" I softly questioned.

He didn't reply, but instead pulled out a small, clear sandwich baggy filled about a centimeter of the way up with a white, crystal-like substance.

I widened my eyes at the site.

"Uh, um, uh," I stuttered out. "That's not mine."

"Do you happen to *know* what *this* is?" the guard questioned, now glaring past the bag and into my eyes.

I raised my eyebrows and rattled my head hurriedly back and forth.

"You would think I would because it was in there, but I actually don't because," I began, and then lowered my voice a tad. "It's *not mine*..."

"This is *dimethyltryptamine*," he urged out, still holding the bag up by his fingertips. "A very rare but *highly* illegal drug."

"Oh," I gulped, and then began to rub my hands together by my waist. "Are you... are you *sure*? It... kind of looks like crushed-up Pop Rocks without the food coloring..."

"I'm going to have to have you come with me, Miss," he stopped me, dropped the plastic bag down to the desk, and then stepped around to my side.

"Wait, what?" I jumped back a bit. "You're not going to, like, taste it or something first?"

"Come with me, please," he repeated, now reaching both hands out to me.

"But it could be warm ice cubes or coagulated Pixie Stix!" I shouted as I stepped back, again.

"Miss, please," he urged, stepping after me.

"And it's not mine; I didn't even touch it!" I yelled, now throwing my hands up in front of myself. "You can even check it for my fingerprints; they won't be there!"

"Miss, stop!"

He leaped forward and grabbed at my hands with both of his.

"I'm not a criminal!" I cried out, jerking back from his grasp. However, he had a pretty strong grip, and managed to pull me forward once more. "I swear to you, I'm as innocent as they come!"

Silently, he moved both my wrists into his left hand, and then reached down to his belt with his free one.

And then, in that moment, *What Would Miss Congeniality Do?* popped into my head, but then I reminded myself that Miss Congeniality's alter-ego was actually Gracie Hart, a kick-ass FBI agent that was far too trained and intelligent to ever be caught dead in the situation I was currently in, so I found myself with no option but to listen to one piece of her advice that applies to just about *any* and *every* situation I get myself caught in... *self defense is of utmost importance.*

"You can't take me!" I screeched out as he snatched a pair of handcuffs off his side, and then stomped down as forcefully as I could on the top of his foot. After that, I charged to my right, toward the front desk area beyond a closed door.

However, he didn't release my hands, didn't yelp out in any sort of pain, and didn't let me go until I tripped on my own poor footing and smashed my body into the hard concrete floor below.

"Oh..." I moaned as I rolled onto my side, and then glanced up while the guard came back into view with his cuffs armed and ready.

"No, no," I spat out, now throwing my hands over my face, palm-up.

He quickly grabbed at them, though, right before I felt the click of cool metal clasp around my lower wrists.

"Please don't take me, I'm sorry," I pleaded before he yanked my arms upward. "I'm a good kid, Sir, I'm... I have straight Cs!"

"Come on," he ordered, now forcing my back up to a stand beside him. "With me..."

He turned around, and then pulled me toward the tall, metal windowless door close ahead on the side wall.

"You- You're," I began, finding myself with no choice but to step quickly after him. "You're not taking me... to the... the *bad* place, are you?"

"This way, please," he said, now using a keycard to unlock the metal door in front of us.

I stood aback, his hand still holding my right forearm, while he creaked the passageway open. I then stared straight ahead at the long corridor lined with rows upon rows of metal bars on either side.

"Please, no," I uttered.

He paced through the doorframe, and then jerked me forward behind him.

"No, no!" I raised my voice, stumbling into the new, cold, and slightly chatty area. "I can't go in here, this... this is *jail!* I can't go to *jail!*"



The guard slammed the entrance shut behind us, and then strode quickly forward, dragging me all the while. I glanced both left and right as we walked, noticing about one in every three prison cells were filled with one person, each one of them being a female, young or middle-aged, in an orange jumpsuit glaring back at me as I passed.

"Please don't make me wear one of those ugly things," I mumbled.

"Over here," the guard commanded, swerving to the left, where the hallway turned into another, shorter, and emptier one. He then stepped up to the first holding cell, stopped, and pulled out a heavy, full keychain from his utility belt with his free hand.

"I was framed, you know," I urged out, feeling the tiniest few sweat beads begin to form on my forehead and upper lip. "It was probably Miranda. She put a curse on me once, and she's tried to kill me on multiple occasions, and she's actually *in this* prison. I saw her." I paused as he looked down and began to jam one of his few too many keys into the metal lock on the bars beside us. "Miranda Lively, you know her? I'd be surprised if you didn't; she's a criminal mastermind. About four-fifths of the cops in Wisconsin know her just by the shape of her crotch."

The guard shoved the cell door opened, and then twisted back to me and tightened his grip on my arm.

"I'm going to have you wait here for a bit," he proclaimed, and then tugged me into the direction of the doorway. "And I'll try to sort things out for you."

"But," I shot out, holding back on his force. "There's nothing to sort out; I just told you- it was Miranda, somehow!"

"Please, Miss," he pulled harder on my limb.

"But Miranda Lively framed me! I know it!" I screeched. "Do you know how many crimes *I've* been a *victim* of recently? The law and I are besties; I would never hurt it!"

Just then, the guard yanked my arm forward, released it, spun my body toward the cell entrance, and then shoved my whole backside past it.

"No, wait!" I yelled, staggering with my cuffed wrists inside the tiny, damp, and quite odorous holding space. I hurried to spin around as he thrust the barred door closed in front of my nose. "Stop, please, wait!"

I lurched forward and grabbed at the cold, rusty bars as he locked them into place and spun away from me.

"Stop! It was Miranda!" I reiterated. "She's a witch! She cast a spell on my purse before I came! She made the die-of-meth-stuff materialize in my bag when I wasn't looking!"

The guard hurriedly trotted around the corner on the right, out of sight.

"Wait, come back!" I yelled, and then raised myself to my tip-toes. "Is this going to affect my college applications?"

I dropped back to my heels, and then fell quiet for a long moment.

"Oh, lord," I grumbled, and then turned around to observe the low, decomposing wooden bench against the far wall. I stared at it for a few seconds, and then made my way over to it, twisted back around, and plopped down on top of it, feeling the cold moisture seeping out of it through the thin material of my black leggings.

I shook my head, and then dropped it into my hands.

"I've hit rock bottom," I muttered out. "There's nothing lower than me; not even my grandmother's rotting corpse in her decaying low-budget coffin." I paused. "It actually couldn't possibly get any worse."

And, just then, I felt the slightest tickle of a touch on my left shoulder blade.

I let out a short gasp and jerked my head up and toward the feeling.

I froze when I saw an uncomfortably familiar body in a prisoner suit reaching a wrinkly pale hand out to me through the few thin metal bars separating her cell from mine.

And then I screamed out in terror, right after she opened her mouth.

*"Erica!"*

To be continued...

## Other books by Kari...

My first novel, *Cartoon*, was published in March 2017, and can be found in most all retailers as this one is. Search for it by title *Cartoon*, author *Kari Lynn M.*, or ISBN *9781370287444*.

*'... "You know, I like to pretend like I'm in a cartoon."*

*"A cartoon?"*

*He looked back and forth between me and the road ahead as he continued.*

*"Yeah, like I'm in one of those crazy violent video games, or a James Bond movie, or a crazy violent James Bond video game... Or, to categorize all of that... a cartoon."*

And, um... well, that's the only other book I have out as of right now!

## Connect with Kari!

If you just can't get enough of Emma Lenford (who *can?*), then you can follow me, *Kari Lynn M.*, through Twitter:

[@NotVeryKari](https://twitter.com/NotVeryKari)

Or you can subscribe to my blog/Wordpress site:

[iKariLynn.Wordpress.com](http://iKariLynn.Wordpress.com)

And/or my Goodreads page:

[Kari Lynn M.](https://www.goodreads.com/user/show/123456789)

And then you won't miss the... ahem, *sequel!*

## Acknowledgements

Okay, so... I *think* I just finished my second book... did I not?

Well, now I get to type up my favorite section... the unconventional thank-yous and gratitudes I have to share with the people who actually took the time to read my story!

So, *duh*, first one goes out to them... I mean, it's *y'all* that I'm really writing for, you know that, right? So, thank you so, so, SO much for giving my punchy pages a shot! And, since you're to this point of the book, I'll assume you actually read the *whole* thing (and I'll pretend you did if you really didn't and skipped ahead from the table of contents), and that means *you* get to be the favorite of all my favorite readers... because you're the *only* readers!

But, seriously, thank you so much- I'll never be able to say it enough.

Secondly, I'd like to throw a shout-out to my boy Drizzy Drake; *More Life* definitely gave me the more life I needed to get the ball rollin' on this thing... *and* persevere enough to finish it, too. I do have one stipulation, though... I'm not releasing my sequel until *you* release your next mixtape, and I just want everyone to know that because, before everyone gets on my back (ahem, *dad...*) like '*when's the next one coming out, when's the next one coming out???!!!*', everyone *has* to understand that *I physically cannot write without my Drake playlists*.

Thank you for your understanding on that... if you do understand, I guess, and, if you don't, then I'll lie to myself and say you do because I don't know how to explain that any other way.

Thirdly, and I feel like some people probably sensed this one coming, I'd like to thank Sandra Bullock for her perfect portrayal of Gracie Hart/Miss Congeniality in her 2000 blockbuster hit *Miss Congeniality*. The reference Emma frequently made in this book was completely random on my part, as I just pulled it from the air eighteen months after my previous viewing of the film, but I'm glad I picked up on it nonetheless.

And, seriously, everybody loves Sandra Bullock, right?

Finally, thank you to everyone who's supported me and my creations and *blah, blah, blah...*

Haha.

But, really, thank you guys; I won't name names because you know who you are, but thank yous definitely go out to the ones who believe(d) in me and my writings.

*And* thank you to all the dogs that let me pet them during the past twelve months...

And I can also give a blurb for all my sweet nibblings, since I am sitting one of my nephews in my lap as I type part of this.

I surely am grateful.

-Kari <3