

# **What Now, Emma Lenford?**

## **Chapter 1: It's Just Begun**

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## **Dedication**

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

## It's Just Begun

It all started with a dick pic.

(And, actually, a few other things, but I thought that would be the best attention-grabber to start off the story of my chain of terribly timed, often of those times life-threatening, misfortunes of which I really had no control over whatsoever in this seriously not serious series.)

"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 toward 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 Talket 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 serial killer 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 desk.

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'. You know, the result of the pre-pubescent jitters, like hoarding up on multicolored synthetic hair extensions, or isolating yourself for fourteen hours straight every Saturday to play The Sims, or... just whatever you can do to make yourself feel better about the impending pubic hair. And, for me, that *phase* was... well, 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 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 toward 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 the 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 Kool-Aid.

And, obviously, Vicki became one of those acquaintances. And, for the record, no, we did not grow a bond over spilled milk, Kool-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 balls 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 toward 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 toward 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 J-Wow'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 toward 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 toward 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 toward the door, moved the lock to the side, and pushed it 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, such as that once aforementioned serial killer, 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 toward 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 inward, threw my head upward, and actually flung my body outward.

*"Ah!"* I screamed out as I jumped from the toilet and lunged my body toward 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 subconsciously 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; 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 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 outside to take a dump in the rain.

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. And, just like the dog metaphor, it was actually raining that afternoon, and the ride ended up making me work up the need to defecate.

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 doorknob 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 toward 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 me and Gray. 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 toward 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 toward 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 toward 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* me.

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. 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 me.

"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 toward 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* 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.

"Trevor, 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 Trevor's voice stumble out.

Trevor 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 toward 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. "With the..." I searched a few of my peers' faces around and lowered my voice. "*Dick... pics...*"

I slapped my hands 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. "I got your phone password, and then I got your... your, um, *nudes...*"

He shook his head, again.

"No," he said. "You didn'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 toward Kyle.

"Grayson!" I screeched out, immediately lunging toward 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 my 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 my 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*."