

What Now, Emma Lenford?

Chapter 10: Don't Let Your Guard Down

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Dedication

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

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 guessed 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 rumors 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 of the 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 sight.

"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 upmost 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 me 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 doorway, 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 open, 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...