

What Now, Emma Lenford?

Chapter 4: Mortification

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Dedication

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

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 the 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 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 obvious he wasn't going to, I took the liberty of breaking my own unease.

"So, um, you'd recommend that one?" I asked, now stepping 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 Bublé 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 the 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* and *ultra-ribbed* and *energized* and *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 toward 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 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 toward 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 toward 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.

I paused.

"Well, there's..." I answered, gazing 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."

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*."

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; 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.

"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?"