

EMMA TAKES A STAND



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CHAPTER 1



At exactly three forty-five on Friday the thirteenth, Emma Manning's marriage imploded. She had never believed in bad luck or omens, and she definitely did not attribute the destruction of her marriage to superstition. Her marriage disintegrated because of her lying, cheating, bastard of a husband, Dennis Manning.

It had been a perfectly normal afternoon until three forty. Emma had left her house in plenty of time to drive to the local high school where she was teaching an adult education class entitled Experience Painting. Several blocks from her home, she realized she had left one of her supply bags in the mudroom, so she made a U-turn and pulled into the access road behind her house.

She had planned to quickly run inside, grab her tote, and be back on the road so she would not be late. Then the speakerphone activated in her van, broadcasting a woman's voice. Emma's fingers froze as she reached for the volume knob when she recognized the voice as her husband's assistant. Emma's brain, quickly followed by her heart, fell into a deep freeze. She had turned to ice, and she could not have moved if her life had depended on it. Melissa

Barton was cooing and suggesting sexual acts she wanted to perform on Emma's husband.

Dennis must have synced his cell phone to the Bluetooth hands-free system in Emma's van when he had borrowed the vehicle earlier in the week. Emma was not a phone person, so she had never activated the feature. Her lack of attachment to a phone was something her husband and friends harassed her about all the time. She was not an idiot, and she knew how to operate a smartphone. She just didn't want to be bothered, interrupted, connected, or tethered to an electronic device every moment of her life, especially while driving.

Emma sucked in her breath, covering her mouth with one hand as she listened to the damning conversation while her other hand dug into her purse. With three touches of her fingertip, she recorded the conversation.

When Dennis disconnected the call with a perfunctory, "I'll see you in a little while, darling," Emma continued sitting in her van, unable to move. During the last several years of her almost ten-year marriage, she had suspected infidelity. Dennis had insisted she was falsely condemning him.

"How could she believe and accuse him of such misconduct?" he had accused. "He was an ordained minister, even if he was not affiliated with a church. He was doing his work by being the head administrator in a faith-based college."

Now she knew the truth. Dennis was not faithful to her. What she had not wanted to believe was indeed fact, and she had proof.

Emma suddenly opened the van door to be violently sick in the gravel. Finally sitting up, she pulled herself together, cleaning her face with one of the wet wipes she always carried in her oversized art bag. She gargled with cold coffee and spat it out, and then she squared her shoulders.

She pulled her van behind the ridiculously high row of rhododendron bushes she had been after Dennis to trim for years. Now

they provided cover as she watched her husband come out of the house, dressed for a golf game.

They lived in one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in Rocklin, a short, six-mile drive from Roseville, California. Her grandparents had built on the property long before it had become one of the most exclusive bedroom communities for Sacramento.

Emma drove a different route out of the neighborhood than Dennis, turning onto the main road several vehicles behind him. She knew where he was going since he had told Melissa to meet him at the Hilltop Villa Hotel. The question was which Hilltop Villa Hotel? Did they frequent the hotel in Roseville, or one of the three in Sacramento?

She followed him twenty miles to Sacramento and, when Dennis pulled into valet parking, Emma turned into the self-parking lot to keep her distance. She was surprised how casual her husband appeared while committing adultery. She was surprised by how calm she was about accepting that she finally had proof that he was cheating on her.

Dennis didn't seem remotely concerned about what he was doing. He registered at the desk, accepted his keycard, and joined Melissa Barton outside the elevators where he kissed his assistant in plain view of everyone.

Emma shot three photographs with the 4X zoom on her cell phone before the elevator doors closed. She crossed to the lobby bar, claimed a stool, and called the number of the teacher's assistant she occasionally used to cover her class. Then, without hesitation, she dialed a second number.

No one paid Emma any attention, although the bartender carded her when she ordered a drink. It was the curse of being exactly five-feet tall if she stretched a little bit. She often went unnoticed even when someone was looking for her. Because of her stature, employers, co-workers, even her husband, tended to see and treat Emma as a child. At thirty-three, the novelty had worn off a long time ago.

Emma had always been the smallest kid in her classes, and once she entered middle school, she never caught up with the other kids. It had taken some time, but Emma had accepted she was vertically challenged. You got what you got from your gene pool. She had inherited her mother's blonde hair and milk-chocolate colored eyes. She had no idea whom to blame for her stunted growth. The only other biological family members she knew were her father and grandfather who were both normal-sized. They were not giants by any means, but they averaged another eight or nine inches beyond her. Emma knew she could add inches with sky-high heels except she was more of a jeans and boot kind of woman.

She ordered a strong drink. After all, her husband was upstairs screwing another woman! He had had sex that morning with Emma, at least what Dennis had been offering up lately, which was a quickie five-minute session with a lot of grunting until he was satisfied. Then he had rolled off, promising he would take care of her later. He never kept his promises—selfish bastard!

Emma heard a buzz of male appreciation in the bar, and she knew her champion had arrived.

Whereas Emma's paint-spattered jeans and t-shirt were too casual for the Hilltop bar clientele, Alaine Michaels' appearance was elegant and powerful, two traits in her significant arsenal of attributes. Emma and Alaine had been teased about being a Mutt and Jeff duo since college.

Alaine was a successful divorce attorney who took crap from no one. She commanded attention like an Amazonian Empress. Her incredibly tall stiletto heels added another six-inches to her six-foot-one-inch frame, and heads turned as she made her way to Emma.

"What's going on, girlfriend?" Alaine demanded.

"Dennis is in room seven-twelve with Melissa Barton," Emma stated, closing her eyes in embarrassment, and then straightening her shoulders to meet her friend's eyes.

Alaine frowned, her dark eyes nearly turning black with anger. “No shit?”

“The situation is vulgar enough, please don’t add to it,” Emma replied softly to her friend. “Yes, he is upstairs with her.”

“The son of a bitch,” Alaine declared, leaning in to give her friend a long hug. Then her eyes narrowed. “What are you doing about it, sister?”

Emma tried a small sip of her drink and swallowed with difficulty, clamping her mouth shut, as she was afraid the alcohol might come back up. She faced her best friend. “I am going to confront him. I have suspected he was cheating on me for some time, but he insisted I was wrong. We have been going through a rough patch for a while, and this is the last straw.”

“You’ve been skidding on that rough patch for the last seven friggin’ years, and nothing has improved. That issue has gone over the cliff. Again, what are you doing about it, Em?”

“I stayed this long because of the children,” Emma declared, pushing aside her glass. “I also stayed because I wanted my marriage to work.”

“Honey, you can’t make a marriage work when only one person is trying,” Alaine insisted. “It won’t work, no matter how hard you try.”

“Yes, I do know that. I do not have to worry about the kids, now. They are older, and at seventeen and twenty-two they can decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong. You and I both know how they will go. Justin will side with me, and Kendra will side with her father.”

Alaine smiled nastily, and Emma chewed on her lip. The expression on her best friend’s face was feral. Alaine picked up Emma’s barely touched drink and drained the glass.

Emma stiffened her spine as if she had been the one who had emptied the glass. She was sure this time, and she had made the right decision on whom to call. It was time to take a stand, and to

not allow Dennis to make her feel guilty when he was at fault. Not this time! She followed Alaine out of the bar.

“Don’t start this unless you intend to follow through,” Alaine warned as they entered the main lobby of the hotel.

“This is the last time Dennis is going to humiliate me,” Emma asserted in a slightly quavering voice she tried to turn into a laugh. Instead, it turned into a bitter choking sound. “It’s too bad I haven’t made it to California’s ten-year alimony requirement.”

Alaine did laugh, deep, throaty, and dangerous. “That is a very misunderstood part of the no-fault divorce code. Honey, ten years is a mere *suggestion*, not the rule of law, which Dennis Manning will fully understand by the time I’m through with the bastard! You have two choices. You can cave and let him keep using you, or you can take him down. Which is it?”

Emma swallowed as memories of their worst arguments flashed through her mind. Dennis always had been so damn sure of his decisions, refusing to reconsider any of his positions even for the sake of the children or his wife. Emma thought of the woman in the hotel room with her husband. She contemplated the duplicity and ego needed for a man to cheat on his wife with a woman who pretended to be her friend.

Alaine was impatiently boring a stare into Emma, waiting for the answer she wanted.

“I’m taking him down!”

Alaine’s smile was pure savage satisfaction. “Good, I am so done with letting that asshole mess with my best friend! There is no stopping me now, girlfriend!”

Emma marched to the registration counter. “My husband is registered in room seven-twelve. I apologize, but I’m running late. Could I have a second keycard, please?” she asked innocently, handing the clerk her driver’s license as proof of identification.

“Of course, Mrs. Manning,” the helpful registrar clerk answered with a smile.



“SIGN here and initial on the pages with flags,” Alaine instructed, pushing the final divorce papers across the mediation conference table to Dennis Manning, pointing to the multiple arrowed sticky tabs. “Be sure not to overlook any tabs. I will be double-checking!”

Dennis Manning was a good-looking man in his early forties who came close to snarling now as he clamped his jaw shut. He did not want to antagonize either his wife or her vicious attorney any further.

“Emma, please think this through,” he pleaded. “Think of the children! Think of the damage you are doing.”

“They aren’t children,” Emma retorted. “Kendra might regret losing her personal maid and ATM, but Justin asked me what took me so long. As far as damage goes, you did it, not me.”

“I made a mistake, and I have apologized. I have gone to counseling, and I have prayed for God’s forgiveness.”

“It wasn’t God you were cheating on,” Emma snapped.

Alaine paused from checking and double-checking each signature, initial, and date on the final papers. When Emma turned her head, refusing to address Dennis any further, Alaine handed the Dissolution of Marriage documents to the judge. The settlement of property had been decided upon with the assistance of a court-appointed mandatory settlement officer, after a thorough investigation by forensic financial experts.

“You have eight hours to remove any and all remaining personal items from the property, Mr. Manning,” the judge instructed as she signed the divorce decree.

“I need more time,” Dennis insisted.

The judge gave Dennis a stern look. “Mr. Manning, you will not delay these proceedings any further. You have had eight months since your wife filed for divorce. I believe it has been sufficient time to remove your things. You will vacate the premises of all personal belongings.”

The judge studied the paperwork on her desk, and then she glanced at her watch. "I can see you have been quite difficult through these proceedings, and there have been property irregularities. I am decreeing that you will remove your property from the residence by six o'clock this evening. Anything left behind immediately becomes the property of Ms. Collins, no exceptions. It's time you accepted the rulings of this court."

"I can't make arrangements that quickly!" Dennis protested.

"As I said, you have had eight months and repeated warnings. I do not care how you arrange it. Do it today." The judge turned to Alaine. "Please advise your client of her rights under the law. This matter needs to be settled and finished."

"Are you sure you don't want someone with you?" Alaine asked as she walked Emma to her van. "Boone Striker is a phone call away!"

Emma smiled. "I have managed Dennis so far. Call Boone and ask him to be on standby just in case. What's it like to have a man like Boone on speed dial?"

Alaine laughed. "Convenient! He and Carl have been friends since their early days as Marines. Having a friend who is a specialist in security, and who has departments dedicated to private detection and forensic investigations, does come in handy in my business."

"He has come in handy more than a few times with Dennis," Emma agreed. She reached up and hugged her much taller friend. "Thank you again for making me put everything in contractual form before we were married. Keeping the house in my name and the prenuptial agreement saved me. Boone's forensic investigator has to take a lot of credit, too."

Alaine smiled as she hugged her diminutive friend. "It's what I do. Although I liked Dennis for a short time, a very short time, I never really trusted him. I grew up in church and in believing. It annoys me the way that man and his family throw God around like a weapon. Call me if you have any problems."

“I will not! I have been leaning on you for months now. I love you dearly for being there for me, but you have an anniversary to celebrate. A trip to Italy for a month will be a wonderful second honeymoon for you and Carl. I may not look it, but I am a fully grown person. I pulled up my big girl panties months ago, and it’s about time I stand on my own two feet.”

Alaine hugged her. “I programmed Boone into your phone as your ICE (In case of Emergency) contact. Don’t be stubborn. Use it if you need him!”

Emma sat in her van, wondering what the protocol was for when a divorce was final. Did people celebrate? Did they get drunk? Were they depressed or happy? It was nine-thirty in the morning, so drinking was out of the question, and she was beyond the point of depression. She was not happy about being divorced. She was simply tired, sad, and glad it was finally over.

Even though Dennis had been caught redhanded, he had tried his best to shift the blame to Emma. California was a no-fault divorce state, so infidelity meant nothing to the courts. It meant a lot to Emma. His brazen and proven affair was the last straw in a relationship that had been crumbling for years. Removing Dennis from her life had not been easy. It had taken a court order to remove him from her home. He had grown accustomed to the luxury afforded to him by his wife’s inheritance.

Dennis and his twenty-two-year-old daughter, Kendra, had turned Emma’s home into a battleground until Alaine had successfully had him evicted. Kendra had moved out with him, as Emma had expected. Kendra was her father’s daughter, and she had him wrapped around her little finger. Nine years of Emma being her mother and protector had not put a dent into Kendra’s belief that Emma had *stolen* her father.

After hearing of the divorce plans, Justin Manning had flown home for a weekend visit. He had given his father the middle finger when Dennis ordered him to move out of Emma’s home.

Justin was far more independent and responsible than his older

sister. At eighteen, he was living in New York City during his second year at Julliard on a full-ride music scholarship. He was also nearly self-sustaining in one of the most expensive cities in the nation, even though he was a full-time student. His talent as a pianist was already in demand.

Justin had left little behind, but he missed his adoptive mother. He adored Emma, and she adored him. He stood firmly behind her decision to divorce his father.

Emma tried to go shopping except she was not in the mood. After several unsuccessful forays into the fashion and shoe sections of her favorite stores, she gave up the pretense. She was a changed woman today, and she couldn't deny it.

Most of Emma's female friends had offered her advice of one kind or another. Sometimes the advice had been crude, sometimes cruel, and on some rare occasions—funny. Most of her and Dennis' mutual friends were connected to the private Christian college where Dennis was the Head of Administration. Almost like Stepford wives, most of the women from the college had come to Emma trying to convince her she was wrong to divorce her husband. Men made mistakes, and it was a woman's duty to forgive.

What the hell was that about?

Emma had never been a member of the Manning faith or religion, a sore point between her and Dennis. Divorce was not recognized in Dennis' fundamentalist faith. Neither were many things Emma believed in, including women being able to speak their minds and make their own choices. She reminded the women that adultery was not recognized in any faith as a just act of men or women.

Unsolicited advice was never ending when a woman was going through a divorce. Most of it she ignored. On the other hand, Emma accepted Alaine's advice almost without conscious thought. She trusted Alaine implicitly. Advice from other friends was less welcomed and considerably less sound in content. Jeanie Maxwell

and Sara Bremer, both divorced friends at the school where Emma taught, had given her peculiarly different and yet similar guidance.

Jeanie, who was in her early forties, had advised Emma to get drunk and find a man to fuck his brains out. She swore it would make Emma feel better. Sara, twenty-five and of a younger generation, had advised Emma to find herself a *fuck-buddy* with no strings attached.

Emma was not the kind of woman who could do either. She couldn't even say the word *fuck* aloud without feeling degraded. Having sex with a stranger was out of the question. She also couldn't have casual sex with a man simply for convenience.

She stopped by a grocery store for a pre-made pizza and a few other things including several bouquets of flowers to cheer her up. Then she was waylaid by the junk food aisle. She selected two large bags of potato chips and a container of her favorite dip. Then, compensating for her junk nutritional lapse she jogged through the produce aisle where she hurriedly picked out apples, grapes, and several boxes of berries.

She went home, put away the groceries, grabbed an apple, and walked down the steps to the lower level. After nine years of fighting for space in her own home, Emma was reclaiming it inch by inch, especially her art studio. She loved her Mid-century modern home with its lofted ceilings and angular windows. Deceptively small in appearance from the front, the multi-level house was built into the slope of a hill. Her grandparents had originally built it in the 1940s, and the home had been left to Emma when her father and grandfather were killed in a private plane crash.

The house boasted more than four thousand square feet, which should have been more than enough space for four people. Even so, over the years, Dennis and his needs had preempted much of it. Emma's grandfather's den had given way to an office for Dennis. Her father's office had become a counseling room for Dennis' students. The housekeeper's suite had become an in-home workout facility for Dennis and Kendra until they had lost interest in it. The

third-floor annex, which had been used to house lecturing professors and guests when Emma was a child, had become an expansive apartment for Dennis' daughter, Kendra.

The below-ground complex was cantilevered from the house, and it featured an entire wall of floor-to-ceiling windows and a ceiling covered with a series of skylights. The natural light made the space a perfect art studio for Emma.

Eventually, though, Emma's quiet domain had been disrupted with loud football games emanating from the continually and increasingly large upgraded television screens. Foot-by-foot, her studio had been turned into a man-cave, until she had been cramped into one small corner. Her well-lit studio had become a dark cave with the lovely light concealed behind room-darkening drapes to enhance the game viewing. Dennis also had used the four-car garage on the same level to house his expensive collectible racing cars. They had built a second garage in the backyard for the vehicles they used on a daily basis.

Emma turned on the lights in her reclaimed studio space. The coverings were gone from the original windows and skylights, and she could once more see the trees and the small creek running behind the house. Drywall on one side of the basement was marked to indicate Emma wanted the wall removed. She had reduced the four-car garage space to a two-car garage at the far end, with the nearer two bays being converted into additional studio space. The new windows were in, as were additional skylights.

Until Dennis removed the rest of his *toys*, Emma had asked the workmen to shove his things to one side of the room so that she could work in at least one section of her studio. Glancing at the clock on the wall, Emma knew she had hours until she could expect her husband. She mentally chided herself. Dennis was her *ex*-husband now. She knew he would postpone coming until the last possible moment when he would probably expect her to have his things packed and waiting.

She regarded his last remaining vehicle, a sports car of partic-

ular importance to her *ex*-husband. Emma could appreciate the smooth lines, but she did not understand or care why he put such store in it. According to Dennis, the Lotus was a man's dream car. He was supposed to remove it today, along with the pool table, the foosball table, and his prized ninety-inch plus flat-screen television.

Emma raised her eyes as if she could see through the ceiling above, and a half-smile appeared on her face. The furniture in the dining room was going today. Dennis' grandmother's prized dining room furniture. It was old, antique French Gothic-styled pieces and it had never suited the house. Emma could care less that it was antique and valuable; it was ugly. Having it reside in the 1948 Eichler-designed Mid-century dwelling was wrong, so, so, wrong! Emma had lost that battle five years earlier.

"Hello?"

Emma jolted in surprise, turning to face Boone Striker leaning against the doorframe of her studio. He was tall, his head skimming the top of the doorframe. Boone had a habit of ducking his head as he passed through doors, and Emma imagined he had whacked himself plenty of times. He was a handsome man with dark blond hair and a square jawline sporting a beard shadow although it was barely midday. He was powerfully built with muscles rippling under a black t-shirt with a gold Striker Security logo.

"You left the doors unlocked!" he barked at her.

"It's a safe neighborhood!" Emma retorted. "What are you doing here?"

"Alaine called. She didn't like the idea of you being here alone to face Dennis."

"I don't expect Dennis until at least four o'clock."

"According to Alaine he only has until six o'clock today to vacate the premises. At the strike of the hour, his stuff becomes your trash. Has he been causing you more problems?"

Emma shook her head. "No more than usual. He has until six today before his stuff becomes freebies for trash scavengers."

"I have new locks and a new security system in my van," Boone

explained. "As soon as he leaves, I'll call my guys, and we'll swarm the place. I'm changing all your locks and installing a security surveillance system."

"Dennis won't hurt me," Emma protested. "You got a bad impression of him."

"No, I got a correct impression of him," Boone insisted firmly. "He is a man who will take advantage of anyone including his unsuspecting wife if he can profit from it. He was hiding money and investments from you, and he was setting you up to be responsible for his debts after he split with his bimbo assistant! He didn't get away with it because you caught him with his pants down, figuratively and literally."

Emma dropped her head, and Boone swore under his breath. He went to her and wiped a tear from under her eye with his thumb. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Emma, but you have to face the facts and the truth."

"I have," Emma whispered. "It's hard to accept I wasted ten years of my life on a dishonorable man. I loved and trusted him!"

"He wasn't worthy of your trust, and he isn't worth your tears," Boone growled. "From what I have heard, you were a good wife and a good mother to his children. At least one of them turned out well. I like Justin. The girl is a spoiled, entitled brat. She needs a boot up her ass!"

"I tried with Kendra. She would never accept me as her mother, just her wicked stepmother."

"It's her loss," Boone proclaimed. "I know it's a hard day for you, but please don't cry."

His sympathetic words turned on a faucet of tears.

"Aw, man! Slug me or something, will you? I hate seeing a woman cry!"

"Give me a hammer," Emma teased through her tears. In response, Boone gave her a smile that was sexy as hell.

"You have had months to get used to the idea, and the divorce is finally over. You should not be crying. You should be celebrating!"

“I’m a woman,” Emma explained, swiping at her tears with the sleeve of her shirt. “You are a big, tough, ex-Marine. You should be able to handle a few tears from a woman.”

“If I’m causing them, maybe,” Boone answered.

“Why would you cause tears?” Emma asked.

“The biggest reason would be if I had taken her in hand and spanked her ass for misbehaving!”