

## Bennett

My fingers twitched at my side as I watched Henley examine every inch of my house. As much as I loved watching her expressions of awe, I felt nervous. The initial high of having someone over had worn off and I felt antsy. It'd been a long time since I'd let someone over. Even longer since I had a *woman* over. I didn't know why I was so nervous. She seemed perfectly at ease. Shouldn't she be the one feeling anxious? Especially after the incident with my brother's room? I'd left the door unlocked so it was really my fault, but my rash actions didn't seem to have bothered her at all.

The woman in question pressed her face against the glass wall that overlooked the lake and I wanted to tell her not to smudge it but managed to keep my mouth shut. She moved into the kitchen, trailing a hand across the marble countertops and stopping by the spice rack to inspect the contents. I stayed rooted to the spot, unsure whether to go after her or not.

It kind of annoyed me that I felt uncomfortable in my own house, but I had expected it when I'd decided to let her over. No one had been in here for a long time. I wasn't even sure why I thought I'd let her over. Yes, it was the easiest way to trick my mom into thinking we were serious, but there were other ways too.

"Wow! You have one of those refrigerators that dispense crushed ice!" she commented excitedly.

I quirked an eyebrow. Out of everything in my place, she was most impressed by that? "You don't have one of those?"

She shook her head and moved on, leaving the kitchen area and returning back to the main part of the living room. I stood above her, on the elevated portion.

"Are you really going to cook me dinner?" she asked, looking at me expectantly.

Her sudden stare surprised me a little and I felt my body tense up. "Do you not want me to?"

"Don't you have cooks for that?"

I frowned. "There are some things I do for myself, you know."

"Hmm, I wouldn't have guessed," she responded. There was a teasing smile on her face, so I knew not to be offended.

"In my free time, I like to cook. I find it relaxing," I told her and I didn't know why I was trying to explain myself.

"You must have a lot of free time. I mean, you've been stealing all my free time this whole week pretty much. Aren't you the CEO of your hotel? Don't you have to work?"

I'd been *stealing* her free time? What did she mean by that? Wasn't I paying her for this? And that aside, did she dislike spending time with me that badly? "I'm not the CEO yet," I muttered and didn't like how meek my voice sounded.

"You're not? Is your mom the CEO? Your dad?"

"You're just full of questions today," I said, shoving my hands into my jean pockets.

She shrugged and pushed her long hair behind her ears. I liked the way it framed her face like that. "You said we should be friends, right? So we should start with the basics. Like family."

"What about your family?" I countered.

"Ah..." She trailed off, suddenly looking anywhere but at me. "My family is kind of messed up. I'm not sure you want to hear it."

The corners of my lips twitched. For her to be living alone so young, I figured something was amiss. "Hmm, that's funny, because I was about to say the same thing."

She looked back up and raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? Should we bet on who's family is more wacked?"

"Bet?" I repeated, shocked. Did she want to make a game of it?

A hand shot to her mouth to cover the laughter that spilled from her lips. "I'm just kidding. Don't look so taken aback."

I cleared my throat, feeling slightly embarrassed. "Of course."

"I do have a kind of personal question. So if I can ask you it, you can ask me one," she continued, walking a little closer to me.

My eyes focused on a rip in her jeans just above the knee. Had she bought them like that? Or were they just old? You could see a bit of the skin on her thigh and—

"Um, Bennett?"

I shot my gaze back to her face and realized she was only about a foot away now. "Yes," I said automatically.

"Okay. Why don't you let people into your house? What did you mean that it was your only place left? I can tell you're uncomfortable right now. If it makes you that uncomfortable for me to be here, I can leave. I don't want to be interfering," she said and shifted on her feet a little.

I held in a lie that jumped to the tip of my tongue. It was an automatic response — lie and move on. You shouldn't let anyone know too much. They could use it against you. That's how I usually felt. But I didn't want to lie to Henley. I was wrong when I'd thought she was at ease. She was just better at hiding it than me. "Henley, I'm really sorry for my earlier actions," I started. "It's not that you're making me uncomfortable. I'm just not used to anyone being here. My home is very personal. That's why I don't let people in here. When you're in a certain position like I am, it's better to keep your life private. If people find out the wrong thing, they can use it against you."

She nodded as I spoke. It felt awkward explaining it to her. It seemed like such a foolish reason.

I took a slow breath. "And the room you tried to enter is another reason why I don't want anyone over. That's actually my—"

"Ah! You don't have to tell me that," she interrupted, holding up her hands. "I mean I am really curious about it, but that's completely your business." She turned a little pink and her eyes darted back to upstairs.

I had a gross feeling about her thoughts and snapped my fingers to get her attention. "It's not something from 50 Shades of Grey you pervert."

She turned a little darker and laughed a little. "Ha ha, I wasn't thinking *that*."

"I am slightly offended you think I would have a room like that."

"You kind of fit the role."

"Are you purposely insulting me?" I accused.

She bit her lip to keep from grinning too widely and I found myself focusing on it much more than I'd like to admit. I hadn't noticed how perfectly her lips suited her face. She was so small and cute.

"If it's not something like that, could it be that you're actually a mass murderer and —"

"No," I snapped, cutting her off. "It's my older brother's room."

She snapped her mouth shut, her eyes widening. "Oh! I forgot you had a brother."

I pressed my lips together, grimacing inwardly. I didn't want to talk about this. I'd been caught off guard and had let it slip. "I don't like to talk about him," I said tensely.

"We don't have to talk about him, I feel that same way about my brother," she replied easily.

I stayed silent because no one ever let the subject of my brother go without me snapping. However, a few moments of silence passed and Henley stayed quiet. Then something clicked. "You have a brother?"

"Is that the one personal question you're asking me?"

I hesitated and then nodded. I was a bit curious about her family life, but I'd be a hypocrite if I wanted to pry too deeply.

"Yep, I do. He's older than me but he acts much younger than me. And he acts really dumb, but he's actually really smart," she said, scrunching up her forehead. "Thinking about it now, he's actually kind of annoying."

"He doesn't live with you?"

"Usually he does."

"Why doesn't he now?"

"Why doesn't your brother live with you?" she countered.

I paused. "Touché."

"If I tell you, don't give me any pitying looks and or any words of sympathy," she warned me, giving me what appeared to be the stink eye, but just kind of looked like something was wrong in her eye and

she was trying to get it out. I kept that comment to myself.

"I won't," I promised her because I knew that feeling all too well myself.

"He's been in jail," she said in a tone of voice someone might comment about the weather in.

I stared at her, wondering if I'd misheard her. Her brother was in jail? He was a criminal? Wasn't that a little too intense to say so casually? Why didn't she seem more upset? "Don't tell me your brother is a mass murderer—"

"No!" she cried.

"So you've been living alone because your brother went to jail?" I asked, jokes aside.

She nodded.

"What for?"

"It's nothing horrible," she informed me. "He'll be out soon."

She didn't want to tell me why he was in jail? I was intrigued, but I knew not to push. "Can I ask about your parents?"



"Eh, you might as well know what you're getting into if we're going to be friends," she sighed. "Long story short, my mother died of cancer a couple of years ago, and my father left us after that so I also consider him dead."

Her mother was dead and her father abandoned her? No wonder she had it so rough. How long had she been living on her own income? And her mother had had cancer? Did she have to pay her mother's leftover hospital bills? Is that why she hadn't gone to college straight out of high school? There was no way she could save any money if she was handling everything alone.

She didn't have anyone to rely on.

"Bennett, you're thinking about this too much," she chided me. "I see that look on your face."

"How can you say all this so casually?" I managed to get out, my thoughts whirling in my head.

"It happened a while ago and I already got the hint life's not on my side, so what can you do?" she responded with a dry laugh. "It's honestly not that bad, so don't overthink it."

I had to look away from her; afraid the sympathy I was feeling might show on my face. I'd known something had to be going on— no one would willingly live in that apartment she rented— but it was worse than I'd imagined. Her only family left was her brother who was in jail?

My family was distorted, but at least we had money. Even if my mother died and everyone left me, I could live comfortably. Yet, here she was, with no one to support her but herself. And as far as I was aware, you couldn't make too much money working the jobs she worked.

And yet I'd criticized the place she lived, the car she drove, the clothes she wore. How she styled her hair. I felt the world slow as the realization crashed down on me. Just how badly had I treated Henley? I had thought I'd understood, but I really hadn't until now.

My brother's last words to me suddenly echoed in my head. *You'll never understand just how hard life can be, Bennett.*

"Um, sorry, maybe I shouldn't have told you that. You probably have to watch who you interact with," Henley began again, sounding self-conscious. "I totally understand if you want to find someone else to help you out, though."

"I don't want that," I said immediately and without thinking. I turned back to her, catching her gaze.

She blinked at me, her mouth open.  
"O-oh, okay."

My body suddenly felt hot and I pulled at my collar, trying to get some air. What was she insinuating? That I would think she was repulsive after telling me that? Did I come off like that to her? Was it because of all the rude remarks I'd been making? It had to be. How could I have been so cruel? How could I have not realized? "Henley, tell me, how shallow do you think I am?"

"I don't really think you're—"

"It doesn't matter to me where you live or what your family background is," I said, clenching and unclenching my fists. "Please don't think what you just told me would affect how I think about you. It makes me feel bad. I understand why you could think that, though. I've been rubbing my life in your face. I didn't even realize it."

She shrunk back a little, her breathing increasing. "It's okay, Bennett."

I brought my hands up to my forehead. "You've been doing a favor for me and I've been treating you like a rich man would treat a poor woman. I owe you so much more respect than that."

"Bennett, I didn't tell you that to get anything from you," she said and I could see her hands shaking a little.

Was I scaring her? That's not what I wanted. I felt so guilty. I moved toward her, which must've startled her because she jolted backward. A small gasp escaped her mouth as she lost her footing, forgetting that the living area sat higher than the rest of the floor. I reached out immediately, managing to snag her by the arm and pull her back into me so she wouldn't fall.

"Thanks," she breathed and I could feel her heart stuttering in her chest. She tried to pull away, but I held her firm. "Bennett?"

"I'm sorry, I'm ashamed of myself right now."

Henley breathed out a slow breath and after a moment I felt her arms wrap around my shoulders. "Don't worry about it, Bennett."

"I've been awful to you."

"It's fine, so stop. You're making me feel bad for telling you. Didn't I say not to pity me?" she argued.

I pulled away from her a bit. "I'm not. I just truly feel bad for the way I've treated you."

"As long as you know what you've done wrong, it's fine. Don't beat yourself up about it. I'm a tough girl, I can handle it," she replied cheekily, giving me a tiny smirk.

My heart skipped a beat and I pushed her away from me, suddenly wary of just how fast my heart was going. Had she felt it? What was I doing? I needed to calm down. Henley shouldn't be the one soothing me in this situation. It was supposed to be the other way around. I had to make this less awkward.

"I'll help you with dinner, so let's get started," she insisted, breaking out of my arms, and stealing my plan away from me. "You said you find it relaxing, so let's do that. We both need to relax, I think."

"Let's do that," I agreed quickly.

"Um, thank you though, Bennett."

"For what?"

She poked her head into my field of vision and gave me a bright smile. The first smile from her I truly believed. "For caring."

I knew it was coming. I couldn't stop it. I couldn't hide it. All I could do was stand there stock still as a hot, red blush spread across my cheeks.