

Bennett

"Bennett, what are you waiting for?"

I stared at the door Henley had just exited through, my mouth hanging a bit. For the first time in a while, I was left speechless. Not only from the insult of her words, but also from her fierceness. No one had ever spoken to me like that. Not even my best friend. And the hairflip? Was it necessary?

"*Bennett*," Sebastian repeated, a hard edge in his voice.

Turning to him, I cleared my throat and sat up in my seat a little straighter. "W-what?"

His eyebrows lifted a little but he quickly schooled his featured into a disapproving look. "Why are you just sitting there? Go after her."

Go after her? "Why would I do that? You heard what she just said to me—"

"Have you even been listening to yourself all night?" he interjected. "Seriously, Ben. I knew you were ignorant but I didn't know it was this bad."

I tried to think back and remember what I said. None of it seemed outrageously offensive to me. Maybe I could've worded a few things better, but I didn't mean to sound cruel. I was just being honest. "How is it my issue if she gets offended by the truth?"

Sebastian let out a small sigh. "Bennett, I know you're not used to being around people like Henley and I know you take pride in your honesty, but you need to think more before you speak, around her at the least. Yes, she is poor, but she's working hard and I'm sure that she doesn't like that fact to be rubbed in her face. Especially by people like us. Every time you opened your mouth tonight you mentioned it. She's a kind girl and you've been an asshole to her all night, whether or not you realized it. Go apologize to her."

Seeing as Sebastian never swore, it made me think maybe I *had* been a little too rude to her. But if she hadn't cared about my words the last couple times we were together, why did she care now? Or maybe it was that she'd managed to keep it to herself and she'd thought I was rude all along. Maybe the alcohol influenced her decision to finally snap.

I stared down at her empty plate. A few choice comments of mine to her floated around my head and I felt the unfamiliar feeling of guilt. I didn't like it. Sebastian started to stand up and I looked at him. "What are you doing?"

"There's an attractive drunk girl in a dress in heels she's not used to wobbling around New York right now with no way home, where do you think I'm going?"

Throwing my napkin off me, I stood as well. "I'll go find her."

"I'm coming with you," he insisted.

I found myself starting to say no before I realized it. He gave me a funny look and I avoided his gaze. Why did it matter if Sebastian came or not? It wasn't like I wanted to be alone with Henley. If she disliked me this much already, I didn't want to impose on her anymore. I'd been right in inviting Sebastian along tonight. Maybe he could help calm her down.

Even if I suddenly wanted to be able to do that by myself.

But even I knew I lacked the skill and compassion to do so easily. I couldn't even remember the last time a girl was mad at me. I didn't usually talk to them long enough for that to happen.

"Let's go," I said, tossing down some bills to cover the check. "She couldn't have gotten far. She's like Bambi in those heels."

"While I'm at it, you should seriously reconsider what you think a date means," Sebastian said as we passed by the other patrons. Eugene waved at us and I gave him a quick wave back.

His words surprised me. Most of the other women I'd brought out like this had thoroughly enjoyed it. "What do you mean?"

"Forcing your taste of clothing on her? Inviting your best friend? I know you two are only pretending to date, but she's still a girl and you should at least treat her right."

"The other women I've dated—"

"You didn't date those girls, Bennett. You spent one night with them and moved on. This is different," he cut me off, grinning a bit. "You've got a lot to learn about the dating world. Especially since it's Henley. She's not like anyone you've ever met."

I flattened my lips, choosing not to respond. Why did Sebastian think Henley was so special? Why was he on her side so quickly? Was he attracted to her? Was it because she was so different than me? Anyone with eyes could see she was attractive, but there were many attractive women. Sebastian and I met them on the daily.

But not many attractive women who would speak like that to you.

I tried to quiet the voice in my head—even though it was right. I had to admire her courage.

There was no trace of Henley in the building as we hurried down the stairs and stepped into the street. The temperature had dropped considerably since we'd entered the city and I momentarily wished I'd bought her a jacket. Even if the city stayed warm at night due to the constant bustle, eventually it would cool down. And when we returned to Poughkeepsie it would be quite a bit cooler.

"We should split up," Sebastian suggested as he looked both ways down the street.

"Right," I agreed, rolling my sleeves up to my elbows. "I'll head this way. Call me if you find her."

"Same to you," Sebastian replied and quickly hurried away in the opposite direction.

I set off at a quick pace, taking a look at my watch. It was almost midnight. I passed another restaurant that had a group of drunken men in front of it and a feeling of unease washed over me. Henley was so tiny. She'd be easy to overcome. Would she be able to fight off someone if they tried to abduct her?

I pulled out my phone and found her contact and pressed the call button. She didn't answer and I called her again. Nothing. I was caught between being annoyed and worried. Was she not answering on purpose? Or was she unable to answer because she was in danger?

I ran a hand through my hair, pausing to peer into the CVS on the corner of the street. It was empty.

Maybe she'd already called a cab. Would she be able to afford a cab all the way back? I pulled out my phone again and decided that even if she didn't want to answer my calls, she would at least read my text message.

Don't spend money on a cab. You can't afford the whole drive home. Where are you? Call me.

From the corner of my eye I caught the glimpse of a long black dress and I jerked my head around, only to see a young woman with short, cropped hair in said dress. Not Henley. I sighed, putting a hand over the crick in my neck my sudden action had just caused.

It would be pointless to walk around the city to try and find her, especially because she could've already left or ducked into another restaurant or bar. I started back toward my hotel. Why was I going through the trouble and wasting my time? She'd left on her own. She was an adult woman... who was only five-foot-three and could easily be hoisted over the shoulder. Who was also wearing a dress that would be easy access to whatever scum who might come across her. And judging from what happened between her and Curtis at Michelangelo's...

I pulled out my phone again and jammed my finger on the call button. It rang twice and then I caught the sound of a standard ringtone. When my call went to voicemail, the ringing stopped. I hit call again and it started. My eyes shot to the ground and I saw a phone screen lighting up a little bit up the sidewalk. I quickly grabbed it and saw my own name flashing on the screen.

It was Henley's phone.

My heart skipped a beat and I found myself frozen. Henley couldn't have gotten into trouble in this short span of time. That was impossible. But why was her phone on the ground and her nowhere to be seen?

"*Hey!*" a sharp, very high and *very* familiar voice cried.

I clenched the phone in my hand and turned. That was definitely Henley's voice. And she was close. I looked around — how had I missed her walking by? The group of businessmen were still standing on the sidewalk as I passed them again and I slowed my pace, listening hard for her voice again.

"Don't touch me, I'm fine!"

I stopped dead in my tracks. Her voice had come from the middle of the group.

"We're just trying to help," one of the men said. He was bald and I couldn't see his face because his back was to me. He bent down and as he straightened up Henley appeared in front of him, her hair disheveled.

"Let go," she demanded again, her voice as small as her.

What did they think they were doing? My jaw clenched and I stepped forward. "Excuse me."

Henley's wide eyes shot to me. The guy holding her arm also turned to me and I stood my ground, keeping my lips pressed and my eyebrows narrowed. I noticed he was wearing a nametag. *Kevin C.* "What?" he said.

I pointed to Henley. "*She's mine.*"

The bald guy— Kevin, I had to remember his name— opened his mouth to say something, but Henley beat him to it. "Wait, what? What am I? Your property now?"

Her attitude caught me off guard. Didn't she see that I was rescuing her? Deciding it was best to ignore her and not argue back, I stepped closer to the bald man. "Let her go."

"Don't let me go, that one's out to get me," Henley said quickly.

My mouth fell open. She was making *me* into the bad guy? I wasn't the one who had her surrounded! "Don't listen to her —"

Kevin pushed Henley behind him. She stumbled to the side, her face twisting in pain. "Ow."

I moved forward. Acting out or not, I wouldn't let this guy hurt her. "I'm not a patient person. Let her go."

"Who are you?" he shot back at me, making sure to stay between Henley and myself.

"I'm her... boyfriend and I'll call the cops if you don't let go of her," I warned him, trying to keep my voice even. He was larger than me in every way and I knew I couldn't take him in a fight if it came down to that.

"She doesn't seem to think you know her," he responded, squaring his shoulders.

Henley smirked at me from behind him. For a split second I thought about walking away, but knew I couldn't. She was drunk and upset with me and apparently that made her immature—a good combination for reasoning her actions. However annoying they were.

"You be on your way, we'll take care of this young lady," Kevin said in a sugar sweet voice which immediately pissed me off.

"Can I see your name tag?" I asked.

"What?"

I stepped closer to him, peering at it. "Ah, you work at this restaurant? What's your position? Manager? Certainly nothing higher, judging by your attire."

The four other men who had been watching silently all became stony-faced. "What are you getting at?" Kevin demanded.

"Just needed to double check your position and name for when I go to your boss. I'm sure he'll be interested in his employee harassing a woman," I said casually, tucking my hands into my pockets. What I couldn't do with my hands, I could do with my words.

Kevin scoffed. "Who do you think you are?"

"Good friend of his." I searched my memory. The restaurant name rang a bell in my head. They'd tried to become part of our hotel. What was the owner's name? "Daniel, right? He's not a very patient person either."

His face paling was my answer and he lost his defensive stance. "I'm not doing anything wrong."

I smirked a little. "If you aren't, why are you getting so nervous? I'll ask you once more. Hand her over and leave."

Kevin hesitated for one moment before reaching behind him and grabbing Henley. He shoved her toward me and she gasped and tripped and I moved forward to catch her before she could fall. I looked up to snap at the asshole because that was *not* how you treated a woman but he was already walking away, swearing under his breath.

"Let me go," Henley muttered but made no move to pull away from my chest as I set her on her feet again.

"I pinned you as the clumsy type and I guess I was right," I said, a frown settling on my face.

She winced as she stood on her own.

"Owwww."

"Did they hurt you?" I asked, a sudden rush of anger coming over me.

"No, I tripped and twisted my ankle," she complained, shifting all her weight onto her right side. Then she started hobbling away from me.

"Where are you going?"

"Away from you. Leave me alone. I'm still mad."

I easily kept up with her. "How did that work for you last time? You got caught by a bunch of perverts."

"They weren't perverts," she told me. "I tripped in front of them and they helped me up and you took things the wrong way."

I stopped. "What?"

"You *were* pretty intimidating though, I'll give you that."

I felt a muscle twitch in my jaw. So I'd just made a fool of myself? "I found your cell phone on the ground though."

"I dropped it when I fell. Obviously."

I grabbed her arm, forcing her to stop and pulled her back to me. "Stop walking away from me when I'm talking to you."

She gave me a snotty look and shook her arm back and forth until I let go. "I don't feel like talking to you right now. Stop ordering me to do stuff. I'm not *yours*."

"I admit my comment was out of line. You're no one's possession. But Sebastian and I have been looking for you," I said and then remembered I needed to text him and let him know I found her. Henley started walking away again as I did so. "Henley. I won't let you walk around alone while you're inebriated."

"Have Sebastian come find me then. I'll go with him," she said. "He at least treats me like a human."

I tensed. "You're *my* date."

"Not anymore. I'll refund your money, don't worry. I know you're very concerned about that."

"You're coming with me," I told her and reached for her again.

She moved away from my hand and finally turned to face me again, her eyebrows raised. "Do you manhandle *every* girl? You're so annoying. You're like a fly."

I pursed my lips together.

"What? Are you going to say something about me being *poor* again? Go ahead. It's not like I haven't been dealing with it since I met you," she taunted me.

"I'm not going to," I snapped at her.

"Unlikely."

"I won't," I said. "I understand that I've offended you. I suppose I could've been kinder with my words."

She snorted. "You suppose?"

"I didn't realize the truth would offend you so much."

"The truth isn't what pissed me off," she told me, putting her hands on her hips. "I know I don't have a lot of money. That's nothing new. Believe it or not, I'm okay with it. I'm only twenty-one. We don't all get handed hotels from birth."

That comment irked me, but I knew she wasn't finished so I let her continue. I deserved this at the very least.

"It's the *way* you were saying it. Like you're looking down on me for being poor. Like you're a better person than me. Like that's the only thing about me that's interesting. Like I can't do or be anything else besides *poor*. I'm more than my income. Aren't I technically your employee? Do you treat all your employees like this? I need some respect for this to work, dude."

I watched her as she spoke. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were narrowed, shining under the light of the restaurant. She shook a little and I wondered if it was from the cold or from speaking to me like that. Was she scared of me? Or just not used to speaking up for herself?

When she didn't speak again, I cleared my throat, shifting on my feet. "I understand."

"Do you?" she challenged.

"I admit I can be a little ignorant as Sebastian has pointed out many times. I usually speak before I think. Hearing you, I know I've misspoken multiple times."

"And?"

"And I shouldn't speak to you or about you the way I have been. You're correct. You are more than your income. You're also an employee of mine. The respect should be mutual," I continued and I could feel my palms becoming sweaty. Why was she staring at me so hard? It took a lot to make me uncomfortable but she was having no trouble.

"Do you understand you hurt my feelings?" she asked.

I nodded, feeling much like a child being scolded.

"So?" she hedged.

"I'm sorry," I said, lowering my head. "I apologize for offending you and hurting your feelings."

"Fine."

I straightened back out, looking at her a bit startled. Fine? That was all I got? After I apologized to her and admitted my mistakes?

She stared back at me, a bored expression on her face. "What? You want to be forgiven?"

"That... would be nice?" I responded. Wasn't that a given? It was the reason I'd apologized in the first place.

"Well you'll have to earn that," she said.

"Earn it?" I echoed. She should be happy I even apologized. I rarely did.

She nodded. "I can't forgive you for being a dick to me just because you said you're sorry. Who knows you won't go back to making the same comments as soon as we get into your car?"

I pulled at the tie around my neck. "What else do you want me to do?"

"Figure it out," she retorted. "And while you're at it, refigure your idea of a date. Fake or not, this sucked. I felt like I was intruding on you and Sebastian."

"I invited Sebastian so you'd feel more comfortable," I told her.

"Don't you own a mirror? Let's go home. I might be sick," she said, backing away from me.

I eyed her warily as she winced while testing out her heel. She bent down and began prodding at it. I did my best not to look at the sudden expanse of skin she was showing me. She seemed to notice my gaze and stuck her leg out a little more. If anything, Henley was definitely interesting. I admired her audacity.

Just then a man walking by wolf-whistled at Henley's bent-over form and I whipped around to glare at him while Henley straightened, a blush crossing her face.

"Let's go," I said. No one needed to be checking her out but me. I grabbed her hand and pulled her back towards my hotel.

"Ow, ow, hold on. My ankle."

Pausing, I debated for a moment. I really didn't want to stand here and wait for the cab, but I didn't want to hurt Henley by forcing her to walk. I could carry her, but that was below me.

"Ow," she complained, wrinkling her face.

I sighed and squatted down. "Get on."

"What?"

I motioned for her to get on my back. "Get on before I change my mind."

"Yeah, I'll pass—"

"Henley."

"Don't feel me up," she warned and I felt her climb onto my back and wrap her arms around my neck.

I pushed myself up with surprising ease. I knew she was a small girl, but I hadn't expected her to be so light. Her thighs were warm on my forearms and I tried really hard not to think about them. She struggled for a moment to rearrange her dress so it wouldn't ride up. I could feel her heart beating frantically against my back.

I let out a small breath and hoped she couldn't feel mine beating just as hard.