

"*Ughh*," I groaned, pressing on my temple and trying to ease the pounding of my headache. I really hadn't thought it through when I'd decided to get drunk the night before. Not to mention the fact that I hadn't even gotten home until two in the morning and then had to wake up at eight to get ready for my nine-to-five shift. All in all, I felt like crap.

Ariana smirked at me from the other side of the store, where she was currently wiping down tables. I'd volunteered to do it initially, but the smell of bleach made me want to puke.

I glanced at my phone, expecting to see a missed call from Bennett, but there was nothing. Had I scared him away last night? He'd definitely deserved my attitude, but I wondered if I was too harsh.

I snorted. I wasn't even going to entertain that thought for a moment. He totally deserved it. Hopefully, he'd learned something from it. Admittedly, I was still a little worried. What if he didn't want to use me as his pretend girlfriend anymore? That was a lot of money to give up just for a little dignity.

"Any texts from Rich Ben?" Ariana asked, leaning over the counter to look at my phone.

"Surprisingly, no."

"Disappointed?"

"Not really," I said, opening the cash register and straightening out the money. There wasn't much to do today at work. It was rainy and dismal outside and no customers were coming in. I figured they were beelining for the Dunkin's down the street with the drive-thru.

Ariana nodded a few times even though there was nothing to agree to. "When do you go back to work at Michelangelo's?"

I paused, losing count of the ones in my hand. I hadn't even thought about going back to Michelangelo's. Thinking about it, my suspension was almost over. Did I even want to go back? With the money Bennett gave me, I really didn't have to. But if things didn't work out, I'd be screwed. Coffee House didn't pay me enough to support myself, let alone any college bills that may come in the fall. "I have a couple more days. Thinking about going back makes me want to cry though."

"But your tips are so good! Ten grand good," she added with a grin.

I laughed. "Not everyone is as special as Bennett."

"Hmm, I wonder if he has a brother."

"Oh, actually, Sebastian - that guy he was with the other day - said that Bennett had a brother."

Ariana's brown eyes lit up. "Oh yeah? I may be in luck after all."

I shoved the money back in the register and closed the drawer. "If he's anything like Bennett, you probably don't want to go for it."

"I'm up for a challenge," was her response. "It's about time for me to get over your brother, anyway."

I tensed at the mention of my brother. "Yeah."

Ariana gave me a sympathetic look. "He'll be out soon, Henley. He's made it this long so I'm sure these six months will fly by. Are you still mad at him?"

"I was never mad at him," I told her, putting my arms into my apron and leaning against the counter. "I'll be happy when he's out. Less stress off me— if he can even find a job. Jail doesn't look too good on a resume. Ugh, he's so stupid."

"That's if he even did it," she pointed out.  
"If you guys can somehow prove he didn't  
—"

"Doesn't matter since he still went to jail for it," I cut her off. "Maybe he did do it, I don't know. He does like to drink." I was tired of having that argument with myself. Did Brandon do it? Or did he not do it? Was he innocent? Or had he actually stolen the car and put multiple lives in danger? Either way, it made my head hurt. And either way, he'd been gone for the last half year and I'd been left by myself.

Ariana placed her hands on her hips.  
"When he gets out he's going to want to fight this."

"He's going to need a new lawyer first," I said. His current lawyer didn't seem to be on our side at all.

"Maybe Bennett knows someone who can help. You should ask him."

Bennett probably did know someone who could help us out, but I didn't think I wanted to ask him for help. What was I supposed to say? Please help my brother (who may be guilty) out of the crime we're not sure he committed? It didn't sound too good. "Don't bring it up

to Bennett, please. Don't even mention Brandon's name. And while I'm at it, don't tell him I mentioned him having a brother. It kind of seemed like he didn't want to talk about it," I told her, thinking back. His expression had mimicked my own when someone asked me about my brother. That kind of stop-talking-now look.

Ariana tapped her chin. "I won't say anything. But do you think it's like all those T.V shows where the brothers have to fight for the family business? Because that would be pretty intense."

I hadn't thought about that. It would definitely make sense, especially if there was only to be one CEO of the hotel. A family torn up by money... it would explain why Bennett was so dramatic. "Huh. Maybe."

"*Then* maybe the other brother will meet you, and fall in love with you and they'll be fighting over you *and* the right to the hotel!"

I grinned and shook my head. "Okay, Ariana, leave your crazy ideas to your books."

She rubbed her hands together, grinning evilly. "A writer does need to get her inspiration from *somewhere*."

Just then my phone vibrated and Ariana let out an 'aha!' and snapped her fingers. I flipped her off and picked my phone up from off the counter and looked at it. *Bennett Calloway* flashed on my screen. "I'm sensing a trend here," I said as answered it.

"You picked up." He sounded surprised.

"That's what you're supposed to do when your phone rings," I retorted, even though I usually ignored the phone call and texted the person instead. But Bennett deserved my sarcasm.

"You're at work though," he pointed out.

"If you knew that then why did you call?"

"How are you feeling?"

"Oh, um, I'm fine." His question threw me off guard and suddenly I felt like a jerk. Here I was being bitchy while he was actually being considerate for once. "How are you?"

"I left some Aspirin in the bag with your clothing, did you see it? I figured you'd have a headache this morning."

He'd left me Aspirin? That was surprisingly sweet. I'd been in such a rush to get to bed I hadn't even emptied out that bag though. "I missed it. Did you go out to buy it? You didn't have to. It was my choice to drink and I'll deal with the consequences."

"I carry it around with me," he told me and I imagined him shrugging. "I get headaches often."

"Oh. Well still, thank you," I said awkwardly. He sounded weird today. Meek, almost. Maybe I *had* been a little too rude to him. I couldn't remember my exact words, so I wasn't sure. But it was definitely weird to have Bennett acting this way. Creepy, almost. "Listen, Bennett, about last night—"

"It's okay," he said immediately. "I've been, for lack of better words, an asshole. Don't apologize because you haven't been doing anything wrong. It was me."

Just what exactly *had* I said the night before? Whatever it was, it worked. I was impressed. "Okay."

"Can we move past this? I want this to work and not be awkward between us. I will do my best not to let a repeat happen."

"Yeah, sure." Get past me being completely plastered in front of him? No problem. Gladly.

There was a moment of silence after that. I was beginning to think this was a habit of his. Ariana stared at me hard, obviously listening to our conversation. I shooed her away.

"Ah, that's right. Last night when I was leaving your apartment, I noticed that your lock on the front door was going," he started again.

My heart skipped a beat. Had he entered my apartment? I didn't remember that. "You went into my place?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"No, I just walked you to your door. I'm talking about the main entrance. You should call your landlord to have it fixed. The area you live in is... unsettling."

I relaxed a little bit. It wasn't like I was embarrassed about my apartment (okay maybe a little), but in Bennett's eyes, it would probably look like trash. I definitely didn't want him entering it or making any comments about its state. "I think she changed her number."

"Your landlord?"

"Yeah, she doesn't really act like one. Hence the squatter living below me."

Bennett hummed. "Maybe I can contact her."



"No thank you," I said quickly. I had the feeling Bennett contacting my landlord would most likely end up with me being kicked out. "I don't mind, anyway. The squatter isn't bothering me."

"Squatter aside, shouldn't your landlord be making sure the upkeep of the apartment is good? It wouldn't be a problem for me to contact her."

"It's my problem and my place so I'll fix it myself," I told him. Ariana raised her eyebrows and mouthed *bitch* at me.

He sighed. "Why are you like that?"

"Like what?"

"Why do you refuse my help? Most people would gladly accept it."

I shrugged and then realized he couldn't see me. "I've been on my own for a while so I'm used to doing things for myself and by myself. It's better than relying on other people for everything. Sorry if I sound rude."

"You sound lonely."

I really wanted to say "what do you know?", but I refrained from it. He probably *didn't* know. He was rich. He had a family. It was better just to steer the direction of the conversation away

from myself. The less he knew the better. The last thing I wanted was any more pity from him. "Is there any other reason you're calling?"

Ariana shook her head at me and I raised an eyebrow in a questioning way. "You're so rude," she whispered.

Her comment distracted me and I only caught the end of Bennett's next sentence. "I figured it would be the fastest way. I will come to pick you up and drop you off, of course," he finished.

"For what? Sorry, Ariana was talking." Despite not thinking I was being rude, I lightened my tone to sound more polite.

"I said that you should come to my house because no one mentioned seeing us last night to my mother."

His house? Oh man, I did *not* want to see what type of mansion he lived in. He probably had security at the front gate. But it was part of my job so it wasn't like I could say no to him, especially after last night. Maybe he lived more modestly and I wouldn't feel too out of place. Or, even better, maybe he had a Jacuzzi. A Jacuzzi would be worth it. "I'll come over, but if you want your mom to know so bad why don't you just tell her?"

"Because she won't believe me if I tell her I have a girlfriend right now. And even if she did, she'd want to meet you and then she'd know something was up immediately, as I've said," he explained then he sucked in a quick breath of air. "That wasn't meant to be condescending."

I nodded my head appreciatively. So, he was taking my words to heart. Good. "It doesn't really make sense to me, but sure."

"I know what I'm doing doesn't make very much sense to you, but I know what I'm doing. We have to put off meeting my mom until she genuinely thinks I'm interested in you and that's when we'll go and meet her."

"And going over to your house helps this how?"

"I don't let people over to my house," he told me. "Aside from Sebastian. If I have you over, she will definitely think something is serious between us."

That sounded sketchy. "Why doesn't anyone go to your house?"

"That's..." he trailed off, leaving the sentence unfinished.

I wondered if it was something private I shouldn't have asked about. "Well, actually I feel that way about my house too. So, I guess I should feel honored to be allowed to visit your mansion— house, I mean."

"I will see you at six then."

"I'll drive there. What's the address?"

"I'll pick you up," he responded.

I pursed my lips. I was a capable person. "Why? I can drive there. Don't waste your gas."

"Your car will give away your social status."

I narrowed my eyes but couldn't say anything. He was right - my car was pretty darn beat up - but I still couldn't help feeling a bit insulted.

"No offense," he added after a moment.

He *was* learning, albeit slowly.

"Fine," I agreed in a mumble.

"See you then," he said and promptly hung up.

I shoved my phone back into my pocket and scowled. "Dude sucks at goodbyes."

Ariana patted my shoulder. "Sounds rough. So what did he want? A hot hookup?"

"I'm going over to his house, I guess."

Her eyes grew wide. "Wait, it *is* a hookup? I was just joking!"

"No," I said, waving my hand. "He's weird. I don't really know. I feel like he's afraid of his mom or something, but isn't he kind of old for that? I wonder what kind of person she is." I wondered if *I* should be afraid of the kind of person she is. Anyone who looked down on the lesser fortunate couldn't really receive any respect from me and judging by Bennett, his mom couldn't be too different about it. She was probably worse.

"You think he has a Jacuzzi?" Ariana asked.

I broke out of my reverie and grinned. I knew there was a reason for Ariana being my best friend, aside from the fact I didn't have any other friends. "I guess we'll find out."

\*

Back at home and after showering, I was once again facing the dilemma that all my clothing was old and baggy. I debated wearing the dress I'd worn last night but didn't want to wear dirty clothing.

Which left me with a pair of jeans and a long sleeve shirt, my usual attire. I didn't think it mattered this time since I was just going to his house— it wasn't like I was meeting anyone. Hopefully.

The minute I saw a car pull down my street I rushed out of my apartment and locked it behind me. As I hurried down the stairs I looked at the apartment below me and was surprised to see a couple of squatters hanging out instead of the usual woman. A couple of them stared at me and a couple waved and I waved back a little awkwardly. One squatter was fine but five? Our landlord was going to notice eventually. And I wasn't sure how comfortable I felt with all the locks in this place being shoddy...

Shaking my head, I exited the main door. I'd figure that out later.

I headed over to Bennett's black BMW and slipped into the passenger's side. "Hi," I greeted him. I noticed that once again he was dressed in dark jeans and a button up. Must be his favorite type of outfit.

He turned to me, frowning. "Aren't you afraid?"

"Of what?"

"Diseases."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "I've been living here for a while and I'm okay so I'm sure I'll be fine."

Bennett seemed disturbed. "If you say so."

"Where do you live? I need an address to give Ariana in case you decide to kidnap and rob me."

"Cute," he said and pulled into the street. "I live close by."

Close by? What was his idea of close by? Because he seemed to think NYC was also close by. Hopefully, I wouldn't be in the car with him for a long period of time again.

"Don't get offended," Bennett started and I braced myself, "but do you not have a sense of style or can you just not afford one?"

I shrugged. He got me there. My clothing sucked. Even I knew that. "A little of both, but in my defense my sense of style is expensive."

"If I give you extra money would you consider it charity?"

"Most likely. I wouldn't accept it."

He nodded. "I figured you wouldn't. Even though you're working for me so I'm just paying you for services."

I cringed. "Can you not say it like that? You make me sound like a prostitute. Being paid to date you is bad enough."

"If it's benefiting both of us, I don't see the problem. If you don't like the business comparison I could compare it to a father giving his child money—"

"Please don't," I interjected. I did *not* want that picture in my head. "I can buy some stuff with the money you already gave me, don't worry. I won't buy it from Target either." Maybe I'd check out New York & Company or Express. I usually liked their clothing but I couldn't afford it. To Bennett, they were probably like Target, though. But whatever. He didn't have to know where I bought it from as long as it looked good.

"My mom will most likely call if she sees us on the camera entering my house, so don't enter right away."

I waited for him to elaborate, and when he didn't, I turned toward him and furrowed my eyebrows. "Okay and that's not supposed to sound weird? Why is she watching the cameras at your house? Is it your house or her house?"

"It's my house," he said, sounding a little offended. "I paid for it myself. She can get into the security."



"Why is she invading your privacy like that?"

"She's done it my whole life. That's why I need you. She controls so much of my life I don't want her to control my love life too."

I nodded because that was understandable. "You know you have to sign something to get legally married, right? Just don't sign it."

Bennett's lips curved up a little as if he found what I said funny. "She has ways of making me do what she wants. Right now, it's taking away my house and my car."

"You said that your house and your car is yours. She can't take them. If she does, call the cops and report a robbery."

"You haven't met my mom," he responded, letting out a dry chuckle. "She can and will do whatever she wants. She still owns the hotel. I could be cut off and kicked out."

"Yeah and then you'd have to do what everyone else has to do and work their way into a good position in the world," I retorted. Bennett's face fell flat and I grimaced inwardly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

He shook his head. "No worries. I say many things I shouldn't to you as well. We'll both try our best."

"I just can't comprehend it," I told him. "How old are you again? Thirty?"

"I'm twenty-five," he muttered. "I don't even look close to thirty."

I shrugged and he narrowed his eyes. "Still. You're a young adult, she shouldn't be interfering."

"That's what I'm saying."

"You're scared shitless of her, aren't you? Either that or of becoming penniless. Actually, I'm going to go for both."

Bennett glanced at me, his expression a little taken aback. "Are you still getting back at me from last night?"

I smiled a little. "No, I'm just being blunt this time."

"Well, I'm not afraid of becoming poor. I've been working since I was fifteen and I know how to save and invest money."

I raised my eyebrows in disbelief. "You've worked at the hotel since you were fifteen?"

He nodded. "My mother made me do odd jobs to learn the hotel better. Although to this day I don't understand how washing dishes could make me a better CEO."

"Understanding the workers?" I guessed. It was weird to imagine Bennett doing menial jobs like washing dishes. I figured he'd just graduated college and got whatever position he wanted. But maybe I was just as bad as assumptions as he was.

Bennett made a noncommittal noise and pulled down a side street that led to a small cul-de-sac surrounded by trees. I turned my attention out the window and thought it was odd that there weren't any houses on the street until my eyes fell across the house at the furthest edge of the cul-de-sac.

I immediately knew it was Bennett's house. He seemed the type to want to be the only house on the street. Amazingly though, it *wasn't* some gigantic mansion. It wasn't small by any means and it definitely looked like someone who had money owned it, but it actually *did* seem modest. Most of the house stood two

stories tall with the exception of one side that was only one story, with dark brown paneling complemented by a deep jade gable roof. With the surrounding woods, it gave off a picturesque feel.

The one thing it had that I was expecting was an iron gate surrounding the property. Bennett hit a button on the roof of his car and the gates opened allowing us entrance. He drove down his driveway that was lined with cute little shrubs and then came to a stop right in front of the house and shut off the engine. "Unpretentious, isn't it?" he commented.

"If you overlook the fact that a twenty-five-year-old bought this, then yes," I answered. The house was beautiful. But I couldn't say much until I saw the inside. He could still have a gold bathtub.

"Built, actually," he said and opened his door. "Stay seated, I'll get your door for you."

My eyes widened. "What? You built it?" I asked as soon as he pulled open my door. I allowed him to help me out of the car. I figured he was putting on a show for his mom.

"Not by myself. I hired contractors, of course. But the design is my own. Wait until you see the inside," he responded, sounding proud of himself and a little excited. "The whole back wall of the side split is glass and overlooks the lake."

Ah, I knew there had to be something else. A lake. That probably upped the property price by ten percent alone. "Do you have a boat?" I asked.

He looked at me like I was crazy. "Of course. Come here and pretend to look at these flowers."

I rolled up my sleeves and followed him to a few bushes of roses and other flowers I couldn't recognize. A few droplets of rain fell on my face and I wiped them off. "It's starting to rain again. When can we go inside?"

"Just a few more moments. I have a feeling she checks in periodically."

"That's... creepy. Inside the house too?"

"No, no cameras inside. Just outside. But she can pull up all of our surveillance on her phone," he told me. "I can too, but I don't like how she has access to *my* house security. Doesn't she have other things to do? Today it will benefit me though. Sorry for making you stand outside in the rain."

"It's fine as long as it doesn't start down pouring. Are you the only one who lives here?" I asked, touching the soft petals of one of the roses.

"Yes," he answered, but it sounded stiff. "Let's go inside now."

After unlocking the door, he gestured for me to go first. I did and my mouth opened a little in awe. The first thing I noticed was the high ceilings and I realized that the second story I could see from the driveway wasn't even another floor—it was just the ceilings. Currently, I was standing on the first level and there was a cut out in the middle of the room and you could see the floor below, which meant the house was on an incline and technically this was the second level. A wide, metal, twisting staircase led down to the floor below where a vast living room was set up. As Bennett had said, the wall that bordered the lake was made completely of glass. From where I was standing, I could partially see the water rippling in the rain.

"I like the airy feel of high ceilings," Bennett said as he gently pushed me further inside the house so he could close the door. "I also always wanted a place where you could see the floor below from the floor above. The bedrooms, as well as the bathroom, are on this floor if you follow the hall down."

"How many rooms does this house have?" I asked, looking at the polished wooden floors. I figured they weren't the usual oak because the color was a little off.

"That staircase there leads to the living room, which is the biggest room. There's also a second bathroom and the kitchen on the floor below us. So that makes six rooms."

I nodded, trying to take in the place. We were standing on what seemed to be a wrap around balcony. There was a place to hang coats and what I assumed to be a small closet. Then you could walk down the hall to the other rooms while looking down at the living room. It was pretty awesome.

"Do you want to see my bedroom?" Bennett asked with a sly smirk.

"Not necessary," I answered as I started toward the staircase. I wanted to go to the glass wall and look at the lake.

"Hey! Take your shoes off."

I paused, looking down at my shoes. "Oops." I removed my shoes and brought them back over and he placed them on a shoe rack. I couldn't help but smile at his organization. He also removed his shoes and then escorted me back to the stairs.

"Your place is awesome," I told him as I scurried down the stairs in my socks. I nearly slipped because they were so smooth. I peeked behind me to see Bennett smiling to himself and I found myself smiling too. He was pretty cute when he was proud.

"I'm glad you like it. I don't get to show it off to people often," he told me.

The living room was furnished beautifully. It seemed the house had a theme of being open; it almost resembled the forest around it. The floor was made of white tile and the furnishings were all in neutral colors, but instead of it feeling empty as I thought it would, it felt very warm and cozy. There were multiple plants scattered around the room, some bigger than me.

"Your T.V is so big!" I cried as I walked over to where it was posted on the wall connecting to the glass. It was almost as tall as me! "Do you have surround sound?"

He nodded.

"Can you watch Netflix on it?"

He nodded again.



"Sweet!" There were definitely enough seats around it to watch the television. He had a fancy-looking leather sofa as well as a few love seats scattered around. There was a small section of couches around a coffee table that looked set up for business meetings. I noticed every game system known to man tucked away in the T.V stand.

Moving on, I could see he had a dartboard and lots of art on the walls and that the living room doubled as the dining room with a dining table settled along the glass wall. "Wow," I breathed as I walked up to it. Even in the dreary weather, the view was incredible. The forest broke at the edge of the lake, revealing the huge body of water. There was a dock floating by the shore and a couple of kayaks propped up by the trees. "You really designed this place? That's really amazing. I'm impressed."

"I can tell," Bennett said, coming to stand beside me. He grinned. "You're cute when you're excited."

I felt myself blush before I could stop it. Did he have to smile so handsomely while saying that? "Shut up."

"But thank you. I don't show off my place to many so I appreciate the compliment," he continued, getting more serious.

"Why don't you invite people over? I'd be showing it off to everyone."

"This is the only place I have left," he said, gazing out at the lake, his jaw tightening. He stayed quiet for a moment and I stayed silent beside him. Something told me not to push it.

He suddenly cleared his throat and looked at me nervously. "I'll go make some coffee."

I wanted to tell him that I'd just come from working eight hours at a coffee shop and coffee was the last thing I wanted, but as with many things I wanted to say to him, I didn't. "Sounds good."

"The master bathroom on the floor above us has a Jacuzzi tub if you want to check that out."

I clenched my fist and let out a silent cheer. An inside Jacuzzi was just as good as an outside one. I had to see how deep it was. "Don't mind if I do."

I hurried back up the steps and opened the door at the end of the hallway. It definitely wasn't the bathroom and it was definitely Bennett's bedroom. A huge ass four-poster bed was centered along the furthest wall, with a giant glass window behind it letting in light. I itched to jump on the bed — it was huge, like true king

on the bed— it was huge, like two king sizes together huge –but I refrained. I couldn't be lying on some strange guy's bed in his house. There was a laptop on his bed and a desk in the corner of his room. A T.V was screwed to the wall in front of the bed and a huge bookcase lined the wall next to me. The wall opposite of his bed was completely made out of mirrors, with black imprints of trees over it. Next to that, he had a huge wardrobe and then a smaller dresser. As with the downstairs, he had few plants in his room. His room wasn't what I was expecting at all. It was kind of mysterious and dark.

There was a door by the desk in the corner and I went over to it wondering if it led to the bathroom. It didn't. It led to a huge walk-in closet. My mouth dropped at the sheer amount of suits and button-ups this dude had. There was a display with a bunch of watches and cuff links and so many ties I didn't even want to begin counting them. Did he really need the dressers and this closet for all his clothing?

"I'm so jealous," I huffed, walking out the closet and out of the room, pausing to shut the door behind me. I didn't want him to find me in there.

I moved onto the next door and pushed it open to find the bathroom. I was more curious about the last room, so I closed it for the moment and headed to the last door. As soon as I opened it the smell of mothballs met my nose and I wrinkled it. Was it a storage area? The shades were down and they blacked out the room entirely. I searched for the light switch along the wall and before I could find it, a hand gripped my shoulder and yanked me out of the room. I let out a surprised yelp, nearly losing my balance. The door slammed shut as soon as I was out and I looked up at Bennett in surprise.

"Don't go in there," he said, his voice hard.

I blinked at him. "S-sorry?"

His expression didn't lighten and his words were tense. "I didn't tell you. It was my fault. Please don't go in there again."

"I won't. I'm sorry, Bennett."

It took him a second but he managed to school his features. He rubbed his forehead. "I didn't mean to pull you so hard. It's just that no one is allowed in that room."

"It's not your room? Does someone else stay here?" I asked cautiously.

"Not anymore," Bennett murmured, eyes on the ground. "Forget about it. Just don't go in there.

"Alright, got it. Sorry again."

Bennett stared at me for a moment and then forcibly smiled. "The bathroom is right here," he said.

He opened the bathroom door again and any thoughts of his strange attitude were momentarily lost when I caught sight of his Jacuzzi tub. It was big enough to swim in. "It's like a pool! It's so deep!"

"If you're lucky, I'll let you take a bath with me," Bennett said with a wink, light-heartedness returning to his voice. He seemed much more at ease now that we were away from the other room.

I shot him a dirty look. "Nice try."

"Why not? We're dating, aren't we?"

"You're a pig," I said, shoving him in the shoulder. Although to be honest, I considered it for one, teensy moment because I *really* wanted to use it.

Het let out a quiet chuckle. "I'm kidding. Feel free to come back and use it whenever you'd like. I wouldn't suggest using it during the day because there's no air conditioning in the bathroom and it will get hot, but at night it's nice."

"Do you plan on having me over again? I thought you said you don't like people here," I responded. I figured today was a special case. Especially since I'd obviously invaded his privacy that he wanted to keep to himself.

"If it's you, I don't think I'll mind," he answered, shoving his hands into his pocket. "You can feel free to come over whenever you want. This is the most lively my house has been in a long time. I think I like it."

I suddenly felt a little shy. "Oh, um, thanks."

"Don't tell Sebastian I told you that though," Bennett added.

"Why not?"

A forlorn look came to Bennett's eyes. "I'd never hear the end of it."

A ringing noise met my ears and Bennett's hand shot to his pocket. After looking at the screen he grinned triumphantly. "It's my mom."

My heart skipped a beat. His plan had worked that quickly? That was crazy!

"Hi Mother," Bennett greeted as he swiped to answer the call. "Oh, you saw?" He gave me a thumb's up. "Yes, she's a girl I'm seeing. Her name is Henley."

I stood silently, wondering what his mother was saying. Judging by Bennett's expression, she was saying exactly what he wanted her to say. "You'll eventually meet her," he said, leaning against the sink. "I know. Yeah. No, you can't talk to her. No, Mom. You'll scare her off."

He was silent for a moment.

"Don't even joke about that!" he cried and I jumped. "Stop trying to take away my car for every little thing," he snapped.

I rolled my eyes. Of course.

"Mom, I'm making her dinner. I have to go. Goodbye." With that, he hit the end call and stuck his chin up. "Perfect."

"That's all you wanted?" I asked him. "A phone call? Really?"

"It's the start we need," he told me. "You coming over is the best sign of seriousness we can give. The fact that she called proves it."

I still didn't understand but I didn't think I ever would, so I just nodded. "Well, I'm happy it worked out. Does this mean I can go home now?"

He shook his head. "No, she'll probably be all over the cameras to see when you leave. You don't mind staying a while, do you? I'll make you dinner."

"It's my job so you can make me stay as late as you want," I told him, exiting the bathroom. I was pretty hungry, so dinner sounded like a good idea.

"You wouldn't want to stay if you didn't have to?"

"I didn't mean..."

"Do you feel pressured to do as I say?" he asked, moving around me so that he was in front of me. He frowned deeply. "Henley, you don't have to do something I ask of you if really don't want to. I know you don't think too highly of me, but please don't think that badly of me."

I cupped my elbow and dropped my gaze. The seriousness of the look he was giving me made me uncomfortable. "I didn't mean it like that. I just think it's better if we don't get too close. That way this is easier."



"How does it make it easier? We'll just continue to be delicate around each other. Then we'll always be uncomfortable. Shouldn't we be friends at the very least? We might as well have some fun with this."

Our gazes met again and I swallowed nervously. "You sure you want a friend as poor as me?"

My sad attempt at humor worked and his solemn expression broke into an eye roll. "It's an experience I'd like to have at least once."

"Hey."

He smirked at me. "Just kidding."

I watched him warily. He wanted to be friends? Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all. When Bennett was alone he seemed like a completely different person. I could see myself being friends with him in his relaxed state. It was worth a try. "Alright."

"Just don't embarrass me," he said.

I pressed my lips together. Something told me it was going to be a *very* trying friendship.

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