

"Bennett, it's time for you to settle down with someone."

6K

I glanced up from where I was resting on my VIG Chesterfield sofa, mid-shift to keep from indenting the material, as I'd trained myself to do. At the foot of it stood my mother, who was giving me such a deep disapproving look that I almost, *almost* made a move to sit up properly. Her expression was the definition of disappointment. Slim nose upturned, devil red lips twitching. I already knew where this conversation was heading and I let my cheek fall onto the cool leather with a sigh.

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"This again?" I said.

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"You're almost thirty, Bennett," she said, folding her arms across her chest, the many bracelets lined with diamonds on her arms jingling as she moved. Her dark hair was tied in a tight bun on the top of her head, giving her an all-around stern aura.

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I raised an eyebrow at her. "I'm twenty-five. I don't really think that's close to thirty."

1K

"Your father and I married when we were twenty-two," she said matter-of-factly. "It's time for you to stop fooling around and creating scandals and making our

Her eyes narrowed. "A year? For what, exactly?"

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"I would like to find someone on my own. Then when the year is up, I'll bring her to you, and we will talk about marriage. You can't really expect me to just suddenly meet someone and marry her, can you? At least let me meet a few of the other candidates first."

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The room was deathly silent as my mother contemplated my offer. I could feel sweat forming on the back of my neck. If only she would agree to my proposal, then I could have more time to figure out what to do about the ultimatum she'd given me. If she said no... what could I say against her when she used Lee as leverage?

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"Six months," she finally said.

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"Six?"

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"You may have six months to court someone," she permitted. "Not a day more. When the time is up you must bring the girl you choose to me and I will decide if she will be allowed to marry into our family. If she fails, you'll marry who I choose."

1K

Of course, there would be conditions. There were always conditions. "Fine," I agreed, knowing she would get her way no matter what. I had to take what I could get.

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The wrinkles on her forehead relaxed and she smiled. "Good. You may keep your car. Make sure you come to work today. There's someone you need to fire." 516

"I understand," I responded, watching as she turned on her heel and clicked away from me. 53

As soon as she left, I collapsed back onto the sofa, feeling a headache coming on. Why was she so adamant about marriage? I was perfectly content with the way I was living my life—satisfactory and alone. I didn't feel the need for a girlfriend. And even if I did have any of those *needs*, I could find a willing partner from the local bar. 375

For now, I had to find someone to at least trick my mother into thinking was my girlfriend. It wouldn't be too hard. It wasn't like I didn't have the physical appearance to goad someone into doing it. I was on the cover of multiple business magazines. Paired with my conditioned polite and charming personality, I knew I was a good catch. And if that weren't enough, I'd just show them my bank account. 676

*If only money could buy me a girlfriend, I thought wistfully.* 809

Then it hit me. 92

The plan was simple. Find a woman, hire her to date me for six months, fake

family look bad—"

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"I don't make our family look bad—"

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"—And it's time for you to start your own family so we can give a head start to the next successor of our business," she pressed on.

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I pushed myself into a sitting position, making sure to smooth out my waistcoat, lest I gave her something else to complain about. "So, you expect me to meet someone today and fall in love with them, get married, and have children? It doesn't work like that. Well, maybe it does nowadays with all the dating apps going around, but *I'm* not like that."

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"There are plenty of young women interested in you. Cecil's daughter has been asking for your hand in marriage since you two were five. She's very beautiful, too."

2K

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Legal arranged marriages aren't a thing in America anymore. It's 2015, not 1765. I don't want to marry someone just because it helps our business."

3K

"You want a marriage made out of love?" she asked, her voice taking on a hard edge. "Rich families marry into other rich families to keep their wealth. It's what all our ancestors have done before us and what we will continue to do. That's how

we keep our business alive." 879

Arguing with her was fruitless. "I'm not interested in marriage right now, that's all." 209

She closed the little distance between us, hovering above me intimidatingly. "I've given you twenty-five years of freedom. I've given you everything you've ever wanted. All I ask is for you to repay me with the promise of keeping our business alive." 759

"And I will, just not right now," I responded firmly. The business wouldn't be going anywhere in a long time. We were basically the new Hiltons. What was eating at her? Why was she suddenly trying to force this on me? 460

"You have no more choice in this matter. If you don't settle down, I will take your car and your house." 592

"I *own* this house and my car. You can't threaten me with that." 435

My mom smiled cruelly and I felt a chill run down my spine. "You think I can't find a way around that?" 525

As much as I wished she was joking, I knew she wasn't. I scrambled off of the sofa, placing my hand over my pocket where the keys were. "Wait a second." 61

"Wait for what?"

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"Isn't this a little abrupt? I need time to think about it first. You can't just barge in here and expect me to go along with this."

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"It shouldn't come as a shock, Bennett. You can thank your brother for that."

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A surge of heat shot through my body. I bit my lip, clenching my hands so tight my fingernails bit into the skin of my palm. *Don't fall for it*, I warned myself. She just wanted me to back down.

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And she knew where it hurt the most.

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"Your brother wouldn't give me this much of a hassle."

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"How can you use Lee against me?" I said tightly.

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"It's your choice, Bennett."

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"I'll... I'll find someone." It wasn't like I had a choice. I just had to think of a way out of it. Quickly.

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"Will you?"

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"Yes."

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"Good."

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"However, I want you to give me a year."

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The plan was simple. Find a woman, hire her to date me for six months, fake a break-up right before I brought her to meet my mother, and then claim I was too heartbroken to move on. That way I wouldn't be forced into a marriage with a stranger *and* I would be allowed to stay single until I met the person I was meant to be with. Surely my mother would feel pity for her son going through his first heartbreak. It would be easy.

1K

I grinned to myself, adjusting my tie.

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*Let the fun begin.*

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