

Henley

"Hey, does the last name Calloway ring any bells for you?" I asked Ariana, exactly one week after the whole restaurant fiasco. We were currently at my other part-time job, a coffee shop aptly named Coffee House.

Ariana was, decidedly, my best friend. She may have filled that role solely because I didn't have any other friends and we worked together a good portion of the week, but I was more than content with her. She was cute and friendly and an all-around good girl. The type of person everyone needed in his or her life.

"If I answer that will you fishtail my hair for me?" she responded, pointing at her dark hair tied up in a messy bun on the top of her head. "I was already late for work and couldn't really do anything with it."

"Fine, fine, sit down."

Ariana cheerfully took a seat on one of the stools lining the countertop. Fortunately, the coffee shop was pretty dead, as it usually was in the afternoon, so I had plenty of time to fix her hair up. "I'm actually worried that you don't recognize the name," she said to me. "Although, you do live under a rock most of the time."

I tugged on her hair a little harder than I had to. "Is he an actor?"

"No, why would you think that?"

"Uh, he kind of looks like one."

She whipped her head around to face me. I quickly let go of her hair so I wouldn't pull it. "You *saw* him?" she exclaimed.

"Careful, and yeah, he was that guy I told you about at Michelangelo's the other night. Who is he?"

"Think about his name carefully for a moment," she replied, looking forward again. She gestured for me to finish the braid. "You haven't seen it anywhere?"

I pursed my lips, rolling a hair tie off my wrist so I could lock the braid in place. "No. I can't remember. That's why I'm asking you."

"Remember your twenty-first birthday?"

As it was a night to remember, I nodded.

"Do you remember where we stayed?"

"That hotel near the casino," I answered.

She turned around to look at me again and nodded. "And what was that hotel called?"

"Calloway Express. But why..." The connection took a moment. My jaw nearly dropped. It explained so much. Me being supposed to know who he was, his attitude, the fanciness, the ten thousand dollar tip. "Oh man."

"Seems like you recognize it." She giggled.

"Ah geez, no wonder why he knew so much about average customer times," I mumbled. The restaurants at the Calloway hotels were a hell of a lot more extravagant than Michelangelo's. Bennett probably ran some of them too. But why had he been dining at Michelangelo's anyway? Surely he got free meals at his own restaurants. "It's going to be hard to track him down."

"You want to find him? Why?"

"Well, the thing is..." I pulled out the receipt from that night and handed it to her. I'd kept it because I knew Bennett had been way drunk when he wrote it and it didn't feel right just taking the money. It sat in my bank account, untouched. I wanted to return it.

Ariana's jaw dropped as she saw the tip amount. "Wow, he must've really liked you! What's with the random forty-three cents and that weird note? He wants you to be his girlfriend? You didn't say you two were flirty-flirty. What exactly happened again? You should definitely call him. And you should get me a job at your work."

I shook my head. "No way. I couldn't let someone like you work there. You'd be eaten alive."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're too cute for your own good. I'd be afraid of you getting harassed. And besides, I'm returning the money."

She handed me the receipt again. "Why? That would really help you out, Henley."

"Yeah, but it's not right. He was really drunk."

"So? Drunk and *rich*. I doubt someone like him would even notice they were missing ten grand. Ah, it's annoying to even think about. You should just keep it," she advised, poking at the finished braid.

I slapped her hand away. "You'll mess it up. And I'm not keeping it. It feels weird." Besides, the note had said the tip was an advance. An advance for what, I didn't know, but an advance was something you had to pay back and I'd rather just avoid the whole thing altogether.

Ariana turned to me, her brown eyes taking on a serious edge. "All honest heart aside, you should at least keep it for emergency money. What if something happens to you or your brother or your apartment? How much do you have saved up on your own?"

Not enough was the answer to that. And as much as I did want to keep the money for extremities, I couldn't bring myself to do it. It just didn't feel right. Taking money from drunken people was like taking candy from a baby. "I just can't keep this money. I'd feel gross. I'm giving it back."

Resigned, she sighed lightly. "I know. I'd probably do the same in the end. It kinda sucks though. Ten grand to the rich is nothing. Ten grand to us is everything."

"Hey, at least we appreciate each dollar more than them," I responded brightly.

"Mmm," she responded, trailing off and gazing out the door. Then her eyes widened and she turned back to me. "Oh my god." She pointed toward the door. "It's... Callow... Look!"

Just as the door jingled, signaling the arrival of a customer, I pivoted to see none other than Bennett Calloway coming through the doors. I felt like I could spot that confident gait and that trussed up hair from a mile away.

I stood rooted to my spot in front of the counter. What in the world was he doing here?

"Henley," he greeted me, a handsome smile on his face.

I wasn't sure if I was more weirded out by the fact that he was here, or that he remembered my name. I glanced at the young man he'd come in with and realized it was the same guy Bennett had been with at the restaurant a week prior. What was his name again? Bates? Bastion? Like from *The Little Mermaid*? "Uhh, crab?" I said aloud, eyeing the light-haired man.

His expression became confused and Bennett quickly put a hand to his mouth, disguising his laugh as a cough.

Realizing what I said, I felt my face warm up. "Wait, sorry! I didn't mean to say that. I meant to say Sebastian. I was just thinking of The Little Mermaid."

"It's okay," Sebastian said, smiling a little bit. "I'm pleased that you remembered my name, actually."

Was it weird that I remembered his name? Probably. I was just as strange as Bennett now. "I haven't met a Sebastian before, that's why," I covered.

Bennett smirked. "Have you met a Bennett before?"

"Most likely," I answered, his smug look annoying me.

He immediately dropped it and folded his arms over his chest. After brooding for about point-five seconds, he glanced around the shop, now seemingly interested in it. I followed him with my eyes as he walked over to the painted mural on the wall, then to one of the wooden tables, and then finally to the marble counter. Ariana stood behind it, near the register. She shot a bewildered look at me and I gave a slight shake to my head as if to say *I have no idea what's happening*.

She brushed her bangs out of her face and smiled hesitantly. "Um, would you like something, Mr. Calloway?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. *Mr. Calloway?* Why was she being so polite? This guy barely looked older than us.

"Your phone number?" he responded smoothly.

Ariana became flustered and I did my best not to roll my eyes. Sebastian shook his head a little bit, but he was smiling.

"I'll actually have an iced coffee. Black, please," Bennett said before turning slightly so that he could rest his back against the counter. I thought he kind of looked the type to drink black coffee. All business like and strict.

Ariana went off to make his beverage and I walked over to him, my arms still in my apron. "What are you doing here, anyway?" I asked. How had he known I worked here?

"I came to see you," he answered.

"Why?"

He pushed himself off the counter, closing the distance between us. When he was about five inches away, he stopped. I caught my breath a little, uncomfortable with our proximity. The scent of his cologne wafted in the air between us. It smelt good. A very woody smell. "You haven't called me," he stated simply.

I looked into his dark eyes and swallowed nervously. His presence almost felt overbearing. Clearing my throat, I took a step back. "Was I supposed to?"

"I left you a note."

"Yeah, a weird note," I told him, pulling it out of my pocket and handing it to him. "Don't you remember? Or were you too drunk?"

Brows furrowed, he smoothed out the wrinkled paper and skimmed over it. I waited for his reaction to the tip amount, but his face didn't change. "I was worried that I didn't leave a tip, but I see that I did."

"What's with the forty-three cents?" I asked because I couldn't help myself.

"I like for a flat dollar amount to be taken out of my bank account."

Well, that kind of made sense. I didn't understand how he wasn't in shock over the total, though. "Yeah, I've been meaning to return it to you."

"Return it to me?"

"You were drunk, you didn't know what you were doing. I haven't spent any of the money," I promised him. "I'll return it to you right now. Let me grab my checkbook—"

"I don't want it," he interrupted, shoving the receipt back at me. "Do as I said and take it as an advance."

I paused, staring at him like he was crazy. "An advance? For what?"

"Being my girlfriend, obviously."

Wait, he had been serious about that? It wasn't just a joke? Or part of his drunken stupor? "Sorry?"

"I have your coffee, Mr. Calloway," Ariana announced, gaining the attention of the dark-haired man.

He turned and gave her a handsome smile. "Thank you."

"Woah, wait a second." I turned to Sebastian, who'd taken a seat at one of the wooden tables. His head rested against the wall and his hands were folded across his lap as he watched us amusedly. "Is your friend crazy?" I asked him.

He chuckled a bit and shrugged. "Maybe."

"I'm not crazy," Bennett said, taking a sip of his coffee. I didn't miss the slight grimace on his face. "I'm only being sensible."

"How is giving me ten thousand dollars and asking me to be your girlfriend sensible?" I demanded. And like every typical girl being asked out by strangers I said, "I don't even *know* you."

Bennett seemed a little unsettled by my response. He pressed his lips into a flat line and *tsked*. "Well, this isn't what I'd expected."

I really wanted to throw my hands up in the air and tell him he was out of it, but I refrained. "Will you please just take back your money and leave?"

"I won't leave until we have a deal," he told me, walking over to the table Sebastian was at and taking a seat opposite of him. "Excuse me, Miss? Do you have cheesecake?"

Ariana pointed at herself and Bennett nodded. "We do," she responded immediately. "I'll bring you over two slices. Um, would you like anything?" She directed her question to Sebastian.

"Please. Hot coffee, regular cream, and extra sugar."

I wanted to tell Ariana not to get them anything, but they had become paying customers, so I couldn't. I felt like I was the only one unnerved by the situation. Sighing lightly, I went behind the counter to get their pastries.

"What's going on?" Ariana whispered to me as soon as I was close enough.

"No idea," I said.

Her eyes were wide with excitement. "How are you being so cool about this? If Bennett Calloway asked me out, I would faint."

I wanted to say that there was no way he was just asking me out. There was a reason for it. On the strange note he'd left, he'd said we could help each other out. But with what, I wasn't sure. I decided that would be my first question for him.

After plating two slices of cheesecake and covering them with strawberry, I returned to the two young men, placing the dishes in front of them. Then I dragged a chair from a different table over and took a seat. "How did you know I work here?" I asked. "Why did you come?"

"I'm here because you haven't called me back and I found you by calling your other job," Bennett answered easily. He picked up a fork and cut off a little bit of the cheesecake, inspecting it for a moment before putting it into his mouth. "It's been frozen," he said, making a face.

"We're a coffee shop, not a pastry shop," I told him, a little irritated by his reaction. Maybe he wasn't used to anything that didn't cost more than twenty dollars apiece.

I was going to have to say something to the employees at Michelangelo's though. You weren't supposed to give out information on any employee, and yet they'd given mine to Bennett.

Sebastian tried to take Bennett's plate away, obviously fine with the pre-frozen cheesecake, but the latter pulled it out of reach. "I'll still eat it. Better to not waste food. Henley, why didn't you call me?"

"Why would I?"

He gave me a look as if to say *who wouldn't?* "We can help each other out. I've been telling you this for the past ten minutes."

"Yeah, but how?" I pressed. I had no idea what I could do for a man who had everything.

"You said you needed money. I have money. I need a girlfriend. You are a girl," he spelled out, pointing his fork at me. "As I said, we'd make good business partners."

I stared at him. "I don't know what kind of person you are, or how you grew up, but you can't just *buy* me."

Bennett frowned a little at me. "I'm not buying you. I'm offering you money in exchange for services."

"Like your own prostitute?" I exclaimed, eyes wide. Was this guy serious? Did he not see what was completely wrong with what he was asking?

"No, not a prostitute, just my girlfriend," he amended. "Just for six months. All you have to do is show up to a few parties with me, snap a few photos, and act the part. No need for any sexual favors."

I stared at him and he stared back at me, unblinking. His face showed no hint of humor. He was serious about this. I couldn't believe it. "Why?"

He sat a little straighter in his seat, smoothing out his shirt. "Various reasons but mainly so I'm not forced to marry a stranger of my mom's choosing."

"So you're going to fake that you have a girlfriend? What good will that do?" Also, I was pretty sure you couldn't force someone to marry anyone else, but I didn't say anything. Who knew what went on in the Calloway family?

"She's given me six months to find someone I'm interested in. I figure if I find someone, pretend to date them, say I've fallen in love with them, and then have them break up with me, I can claim I'm too heartbroken to move on," he explained in a rush, not even pausing to take a breath. His lips curved up a little and I could tell he was proud of his plan.

Speechless, I once again turned to Sebastian to gauge his reaction. His eyes were lit up with enjoyment— like this was the best thing he'd seen in a long time. He obviously knew how bizarre his friend was being, but wasn't saying anything to stop him.

"Er... okay," I finally said. Bennett's eyes never left my face and I bit my lip. "So you want me to pretend to be your girlfriend so you don't have to get married?"

He nodded.

"And why me?"

"Right place, right time?" he tried, giving me a hopeful grin. "You caught my interest and I feel slightly responsible for having you suspended from your job. I shouldn't have told you to punch Curtis."

I grimaced at the memory. "No, you did right there. That pig deserved it." Still, the month of suspension was complete bullshit. I was lucky I had a second job to try and scrape by with.

Bennett leaned toward me. "Let me make it up to you. Be my girlfriend. It'll only be for six months. I'll pay you as I see fit."

While the idea of being paid to date someone made my skin crawl, I was curious to know just how much money was involved. The coffee shop didn't give me many hours. I'd barely be able to make it by, even with my savings. "Okay, let's say I might do it—"

"Perfect! Let's start with the fine details," he cut in, searching for something in his pocket and pulling out his phone.

"Wait, I didn't say I agree yet," I said, holding up my hands. "There's a lot to think about."

He gave me an expressionless look. "Is there? Why? I'm good-looking. I'm successful. I'm wealthy. What more could you need?"

Well, he definitely had the confidence for his looks. "Doesn't it sound weird to you at all? I'd feel cheap."

"Listen, Henley," he started seriously, his gaze piercing into mine. "It's just for six months. Just think of it as two friends helping each other out."

"But..."

"But..."

There was no way I could agree to this. No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't stoop that low. I had to uphold some kind of dignity.

"I'll pay you ten thousand per month."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"Not bad, right?" he asked cheekily.

Ten thousand for each month? So in six months that was sixty thousand? That was more than I could make in four years! Was he serious? Who was I kidding? He was completely serious. That much money was probably chump change to him.

But to me...

Silently, I bid farewell to whatever pride I'd thought I wanted. "So what are the terms?"

Bennett grinned broadly at my submission. "Let's discuss them, shall we?"