

Henley

My phone went off for the tenth time in twenty minutes. Annoyed, I pulled it out of my pocket to see the name *Bennett Calloway* flashing on the screen. Was he some kind of crazy stalker? I'd never met anyone who would call someone *every two minutes* if they didn't answer right away. Not wanting to give him the satisfaction of me answering it, I decided to just turn off my phone. Then it wouldn't be as distracting.

"Bennett again?" Ariana called from the back room.

"Doesn't he know I'm at work?" I wondered out loud. Like he'd asked, I'd sent him my schedule at Coffee House for the week. So if he'd got it, why was he trying to call me during the middle of my shift? I couldn't just answer my phone at work.

Well, I actually could, but I wouldn't tell him that.

"Aren't you kind of excited?" Ariana said as she returned with an armful of coffee bean bags. "He's so handsome."

"He's cute, but his personality needs some work," I responded, thinking back to the comment about my breasts. Didn't he have any common courtesy? Didn't he know how mortifying that was? I looked down at my shirt, making sure nothing was popping out or straining. How was it my fault that my boobs were too big for my body? Or that retailers I could afford didn't make "small torso, big boob" size? And he didn't need to mention it right off the bat.

My cheeks were starting to warm up from just the memory and I shook my head furiously.

Ariana watched me curiously. "You know, about the boob thing, I'm sure he was just trying to give you some advice—"

"Ugh, just don't talk about it," I cut her off, covering my ears. "Ah, I'm so mortified."

She laughed, shoving the beans under one of the counters. "You'll get over it. Plus, I want him to come back and bring that other guy with him."

"Sebastian?"

"Yeah, Sebastian."

I eyed her warily and began to grind some decaf coffee beans. "Why?"

"He's so cute and so nice," she gushed immediately. "The whole time you guys were talking he was over here keeping me company. He's funny too."

I didn't know much about Sebastian, but he seemed like an okay guy. Still, I didn't like the thought of him flirting with Ariana. If he was a friend of Bennett, then he could be just as strange as Bennett. "Try not to get too involved with him."

Nodding, she let out a soft sigh. "I'm no competition for any rich girls, anyway."

When it came to money, probably not, but if it came to looks, I'd say Ariana had the upper hand. She was a grade A beauty. Even if she didn't realize it herself. But that was part of her charm.

"At least I'm not crushing on your brother anymore," she pointed out.

I paused, the grinder coming to a stop.

"It'd be kind of weird to crush on someone in jail." She laughed, but it faded quickly. "But he shouldn't be in there..."

Clearing my throat, I continued grinding the beans. "I know."

"How long does he have left?"

"Uh, about six months?" I replied hesitantly. I wasn't too sure. It already felt as though it'd been forever since he'd been sentenced. A year didn't seem like much, and it was a light sentence, but it felt like forever to me. Especially since Brandon was the only family I had besides a grandfather in Canada who was too senile to remember either of us.

Ariana raised her fist in the air. "Just think about all the settlement money you guys will get when he gets proven innocent! Thousands of dollars!"

I couldn't help but smile at her spirit. "That's *if* he gets proven innocent."

The case was a tough one. Even now, I wasn't entirely sure what I believed. Yes, my brother had been drinking. Yes, he had stolen a car before. But I couldn't believe for a moment that he'd stolen a car while under the influence and crashed it. I'd known him my whole life. He wasn't the type of person to do that.

But according to the CCTV at the bar, he *was* the type of person to do that.

Worrying my lip, I ran a hand through my hair. It hurt my head to even think about.

The shop phone started ringing and I jumped a bit, causing Ariana to snicker. Shooting her a dirty look, I walked over to it and picked it up. "Poughkeepsie Coffee House, Henley speaking. How may I help you?"

"Why aren't you answering your cell phone?"

It took me a moment to realize it wasn't a customer calling. It was Bennett.

I hung up the phone.

Three seconds later it started ringing again. Ariana gave me a questioning look. I debated not answering it, but I was too scared it *might* actually be a customer to ignore it. "Coffee House, Henley speaking, how may I help you?"

"Did you hang up on me?"

Ugh. "Yes," I said.

There was a second of silence. "Don't hang up."

"You have two minutes," I warned him.

"Why aren't you answering your cell phone?"

"I'm at work."

"So?"

Should've figured he wouldn't see anything wrong with that. He was probably used to people answering his phone calls on the first ring. "It's pretty busy here so I can't talk long—"

"It's not busy," he cut me off, speaking nonchalantly. "I know the profit of the company and I know it's not nearly as high as other coffee shops around seeing as how there is a Dunkin Donuts down the street. Poor planning on the owner's side."

"Wow, thanks for that very interesting bit of info."

"You're very welcome," he responded. He actually sounded a little pleased, so I guessed he missed my sarcasm.

I leaned against the doorframe. "Are you going to tell me why you're calling?"

There was a brief moment of silence again. "I have plans for us tonight."

"Plans?"

"Yes. We'll be going on our first date."

"Date?" I repeated.

"I'll meet you at your place so I can see your dresses and decide if you will need one or not."

"Dresses?"

"Are you purposely trying to imitate a parrot?"

I scowled a bit. "No. Why do we have to go on a date?"

"That's what couples do."

"But..." I cupped my elbow, staring at the floor tiles. It'd been a long time since I'd last been on a date. Or had a boyfriend period. After Brandon went to jail, I'd had to pick up a second job and I never really had any free time to meet anyone or date anyone.

Bennett chuckled on the other side of the line. "Don't overthink it. Just play your part. It's your job."

That's right. It was my job. Why was I getting so nervous? All I had to do was act. I did a bit of drama in high school. It shouldn't be a problem. "Okay."

"Meet at your place at four?"

I got out of work at three, which left me about an hour to shower. "That's fine."

"See you then."

"Oh, wait, you should know that my apartment—" I heard a click. "Hello?"

Nothing.

Scoffing, I hung up the phone. What a dick.

"Who was it?" Ariana asked when I came back out onto the floor.

"One guess."

"Ooh, what did he want?"

I shrugged, feeling a little awkward. "To go on a date."

Her eyes widened. "Really? How exciting!"

"Ehhh." I wasn't sure exciting was the correct word. Nerve-wracking was more applicable.

"Hey, it'll be a free dinner at the very least, right?"

Huh. It *would* be a free dinner. Not too bad. I grinned. Hello four-course meal.

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After we closed up the shop, I said goodbye to Ariana and hopped into my beat up Buick. My apartment was only a few minutes away and I made it there in record time. I jumped out of my car, making sure to lock it and made my way up the stairs to my apartment, keeping an eye on my surroundings. Last thing I wanted was to get mugged of all twenty-five dollars in my wallet.

Poughkeepsie was a weird place. One second you were in a clean-cut, beautiful bustling area and the next you were basically on skid row. I used to live in the better part of Poughkeepsie, near the college, but after Brandon went to jail, I'd had to find a cheaper apartment. I didn't mind too much though. There were scarier places. And I didn't have many neighbors.

Unless you counted the homeless people that sometimes squatted in the apartment below me. But they were generally pleasant whenever I came across them.

The building I lived in was decrepit; I'd give it that. The paint was nearly nonexistent, the stairs sounded like they'd give in at any second, there were probably more weeds than grass on the lawn and the windows had bars over them.

Some may look at it and think *uninhabitable*. I look at it and think *affordable*.

I smirked at the memory of me bartering with the landlord. He'd originally wanted four hundred dollars a month, but I'd made him settle at three hundred with the promise that I'd shovel the driveway myself when it snowed.

The inside was a bit better than the outside— but that was all thanks to me. There were two apartments in the building. I lived in the upstairs one and the downstairs one was currently unoccupied. When I'd moved in I'd scrubbed down the hallway and the stairs until the wooden floors were *almost* shining. I didn't touch the downstairs apartment, but I'd given my apartment the same treatment I'd given the hall. I mopped, swept, vacuumed, and bleached everything in sight. It still looked a little run down, but it was livable and sanitary.

I kicked my shoes off by the door and immediately went into the bathroom to shower. The bathroom was a little smaller than I liked, but since I was the only one living here, it wasn't too bad. The hot water and plumbing worked and that was all that mattered.

"I don't think I'm in the right place."

Walking over to the one window in my bedroom that looked over the street, I peeked out of it, seeing a sporty black BMW idling in front of my apartment. Yeah, that was definitely him. "I'll come outside," I told him and hung up, quickly pulling on a pair of jeans and throwing on the first shirt I came across.

The stairs groaned as I descended them in my socks, feeling my heartbeat start to increase. I hadn't got to warn Bennett of just how crappy my apartment was. No wonder he thought he was in the wrong place.

A squatter was entering the first-floor apartment. I gave her a quick wave.

Once outside, I hurried over to the BMW, tapping on the tinted window. It rolled down and Bennett appeared, looking apprehensive. "This is a prank, right?"

"What is?"

"You live *here*?"

I gave an awkward laugh. "Er, yeah. It's affordable. I'm almost ready. You can come up and wait if you want."

His expression told me that he absolutely did not want to go up.

After showering, I went into my bedroom to dry my hair and plan out an outfit. I knew nothing I owned could compete with what Bennett wore, but I had to try and find something. I dug through my closet clad in only my underwear, looking for any of my dresses, checking all the still-packed boxes. Then I searched my dresser. Upon finding nothing, I felt dread run through me. None of my dresses were here. I must've got rid of them while I was moving.

I groaned, putting my hands on my head. I'd gotten rid of a lot of my clothes when moving to make it easier on myself and because there wasn't really a lot of room in this place. But I didn't think I'd gotten rid of my dresses! Sure, I didn't really have any chances to wear them, but they were still cute!

I went back to my closet. There had to be *something* nice I could wear. Most of my clothing was old and crummy.

My cellphone started ringing and I walked over to my bed where I'd tossed it. The caller I.D read *Bennett Calloway*. "Hello?" I answered.

"Did you give me a false address to deceive me?"

"Uh, no. Why?"

"Yeah, actually, stay here. I'll be right back down. Lock your doors."

His eyebrows shot up but I turned my back on him and jogged back into my apartment. I hoped jeans and a t-shirt was acceptable for wherever we were going because I didn't really have anything else.

I stepped into the bathroom to throw on some light makeup and fix my hair. I pursed my lips at my reflection. No matter how I looked at myself, I couldn't imagine standing next to Bennett. He was so proper and handsome... and I wasn't. Everything about me looked cheap. Even my hair.

Sighing, I left the bathroom, trying to spare myself some self-confidence. I slipped into my Vans and grabbed my purse, making sure to lock my door before I left. Unsure of when I'd return, I left the hallway light on.

I returned to the BMW, walking over to the passenger's side and paused. This would be the first time we'd be completely alone. I took a deep breath before sliding in, shutting the door after me. "Hi," I said, turning to Bennett.

Immediately I knew I was underdressed. He was wearing a navy blue button up and a black tie with a dark grey vest. I followed his torso down until it met a shiny black belt holding up his dark-washed jeans.

Well, at least he's wearing jeans.

He caught me staring and eyed me for a moment so I redirected my attention to the interior of his car. It was pretty impressive, albeit a little dark. The leather seats were black, the wood trim was black, even the floor mats were black.

"Do you happen to have a dress in that purse of yours?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "Isn't what I'm wearing okay?"

He stared at me and I glanced down at my shirt, immediately seeing a hole in it big enough to show part of my bra. Sucking in a breath of surprise, I pulled my shirt up so the extra material would cover it.

"I figured we'd have to get you something, so I already made an appointment for you," he said, unfazed.

"An appointment?"

"You'll see," he answered, shifting the car into drive and pulling onto the road.

I was impressed at how smooth the movement was. The street wasn't in the best shape, but I didn't feel any of the bumps I was used to. "I like your car," I told him.

An arrogant smile crossed his face. "Thank you. I just traded in my old one for this one."

"How much was it?" I asked before I could help myself.

"A little over \$80,000."

My jaw almost dropped. How could he say that so casually? I could buy over five cars for the price of just this one!

"Don't give me that look," he said, keeping his eyes on the road. "This is a very modest car for my family. There are more expensive BMWs. I just happen to like this one."

I sunk into my seat a little bit. "Must be nice," I grumbled.

Bennett gave me a sidelong glance. "Is that really your apartment?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I feel like I could get asbestosis just by looking at it."

I thinned my lips. "It's affordable."

"Surely you can afford something better than that."

"Not really, I'm trying to save up for college."

"You're not in college?"

Somehow the question from him sounded way worse than anyone else asking. It made me feel embarrassed. Which pissed me off. "Not until September because some of us actually have to work to pay off our education." This was the first year since I graduated high school that I'd actually managed to save up enough money to afford a year's tuition. And that was minus my loans and scholarships.

"Why doesn't your family help you?"

Not wanting to sound like the typical oh-poor-me-my-parents-are-dead girl, I kept my mouth shut. I didn't want nor need any pity or sympathy from him.

"Did you hear me?" he asked after a moment.

I sighed. "It's not really any of your business nor do I want to talk about it."

He stayed quiet for a moment. "Fine."

Now it was awkward. But the last thing I wanted to say was 'Hey! My mom passed away and my dad left us and my brother's in jail, how's your family?' I cringed just thinking about it.

"Where are we going, anyway?" I figured I should've asked this in the first place.

"To the city," he said.

City? There wasn't really anything city-like in Poughkeepsie. "Like Arlington?"

He shook his head. "No, New York City."

"New York City?" I repeated incredulously. "That's almost two hours away!"

"It'll be a quick drive. The car has Wi-Fi if you'd like to connect your phone to it."

I stared at him for a moment, my mouth open. I had to be in the car with him for two hours straight? Was he planning on kidnapping me? Oh God. I shouldn't have been so quick to trust him. I was probably going to be sold into some human trafficking group.

No, no, no. He was too important to kidnap someone. He'd probably hire someone else to do it if he really needed to. I was safe from that, at least. I just wasn't safe from an awkward car ride.

"Also... about the other day," he started, clearing his throat. "Sebastian told me to — or rather, I also..." His voice became quieter. "I didn't mean..."

"What? I can't hear you."

He gripped his hands on the steering wheel. "I didn't mean to offend you the other day."

Remembering multiple times that he offended me unconsciously; I didn't exactly know which one he was referring to. "About what?"

He gave me an impatient look. "Don't make me repeat it."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Bennett."

He straightened his back. "I am sorry for making a comment about your breasts the other day," he said quickly, then immediately looked relieved.

I groaned. Why did he have to bring that up? While we were stuck in a car for *two hours*?

"While I was correct in what I was saying —" he tried to continue but I cut him off, reaching over and turning on the stereo.

"Let's listen to some music." Noticing he had SiriusXM, I turned it to the ALT Nation and turned the volume up so loud I wouldn't be able to hear him if he spoke again.

It was going to be a *long* drive.