

Henley

Bennett kept staring at me as we made our way down the street, trying to hunt down his driver. I tried not to feel self-conscious, but it was hard not to. I wasn't used to being so... decked out. And it also kind of irritated me that he hadn't stared at me *before* I'd gotten all dolled up, but even I could begrudgingly admit that I'd gone from a solid six to a ten with my new makeover.

"Why don't we just take the subway?" I suggested, turning back to frown at him and catching him ogling me again.

He coughed a bit and placed a hand over his eyes to shade them from the sun as he looked around for his driver. "Were you aware that about fifteen percent of the air you breathe in on the subway is actually skin particles? And not just from exposed skin. From the *whole* body."

"How in the world do you know that?"

"I like to read," he answered. "It was in a study of the metro back in 2008."

He didn't seem like the type of person to read. But it kind of explained how he knew such random facts. "Isn't there human matter in all air? Especially in New York City?"

"Yes, but not as bad as on the subway. Not to mention the grimy seats. I just spent a grand on that dress and you want to tarnish it already?"

I scowled at him, but my attempt at looking menacing was foiled by my ankle giving out from under me as my heel landed on a crack in the sidewalk. Just as I was losing balance, Bennett wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me against his body to keep me upright.

"Henley, what did I just say?"

Embarrassed, I pushed myself away from him and stood up straight, trying *not* to think of just how firm his chest was.

"Sorry, I'm not used to heels," I mumbled.

"That's unsurprising," he said.

I turned up to glare at him and he stared back at me for a moment, an amused smile on his face. Knowing it would be useless to say anything, I did the other most mature thing. I crossed my arms.

"Should we hold hands?" he suggested.

I gave him a wary look. "Uh, why?"

"So you don't fall again."

Rolling my eyes, I started down the sidewalk, this time taking extra care not to slip. He easily kept up with me and from the corner of my eye, I saw him smiling a bit. We finally found the driver and I gratefully slid into the air-conditioned BMW.

"Where are we going next?" I asked as the car pulled back into the taxi-filled streets. My stomach rumbled a little and I placed a hand over it, hoping to keep it quiet.

"We're going to go eat," he told me, crossing his leg and letting his ankle rest on his other leg's knee.

I was about to mimic his gesture before I realized I was wearing a dress and could not do so. Smoothing down the fabric, I crossed my legs at the ankle. "What kind of place is it?"

Bennett smirked a bit. "You'll see."

We moved slowly through the crowded streets and about twenty minutes later we pulled up to a sleek, multistory building that could almost rival the Trump Tower. The polished panels reflected the streets and lights below, including the waterfall that I switched my gaze to that stood in front of what I assumed to be the entrance. The fountain was a little over ten feet tall and was lit

up by colored lights. Above the gigantic front doors was the word CALLOWAY in giant, bold lettering.

"Are we eating at your *hotel*?" I asked, shocked.

The car came to a stop and Bennett turned to me, giving me a short nod. "We are. Don't worry though. My mother isn't here. This will be your first time at one of our flagship hotels, correct?"

I felt my heart thudding in my chest and I tried to calm it. Why was I so nervous? It was just a hotel. Anyone could rent a hotel room here. You didn't have to be rich and there wasn't a dress code to do so. I wouldn't stick out. But this was *Bennett's* hotel. He actually owned the place. Why would we go here of all places on our first date? Was he not trying to ease into this? Would I be thrown in the spotlight already—?

"Henley?"

I pulled myself out of my thoughts. "O-oh, sorry. What did you say? Yeah, this is my first time here. I've stayed at the express before, though."

"The express doesn't have our restaurant. There may be a few of our business partners here and I will have to introduce you to them to make our relationship seem more believable. Go along with

what I say and there shouldn't be a problem. I'll try to answer any questions that might arise so you won't embarrass us. Hopefully, we can just be seen and not be spoken to."

I was going to start keeping track of the time between his oblivious insults and set records. "Are you going to tell me what to order, too?" I said snidely.

Once again, he seemed to miss my sarcasm, because he tilted his head to the side a little and gave me a confused look. "You can't do so yourself?"

Sighing, I reached for my door handle. "Forget it."

"Wait!" Bennett demanded, unbuckling his seatbelt. "I'll get your door for you."

I wanted to say I was fine but figured I should let him do his thing. I guess it was the polite thing to do. He probably wanted to look as chivalrous as he could. My door opened a moment later and he offered his hand out to me. I gripped it and he easily pulled me out of the car and wrapped an arm around my waist. "Let me know if I make you uncomfortable," he murmured into my ear, his hand squeezing my hip.

I felt shivers go down my spine and I took a small breath. His hand was by no means uncomfortable. Pushing me forward lightly, we made our way up to the glass doors of the entrance. A few men in suits lingered around the entrance, chatting and taking drags from cigarettes. Even from where I was I could see the No Smoking signs posted. The smoke wafted in the air and I coughed a little.

I heard Bennett laugh under his breath as we walked up to the group. They stood directly in our way and didn't move when we approached them. Bennett cleared his throat. "Excuse me, gentlemen. This is a no smoking area."

Only one of the men turned to us, his face annoyed. Upon seeing Bennett, his expression turned to horror and he quickly threw down his cigarette and ground it into the pavement. "Mr. Calloway, I'm so sorry!" He bent down to retrieve the butt and bowed his head.

The other three men looked over and quickly caught on, taking the cigarettes from their mouths and spitting out apologies. I was a little impressed. Bennett had these guys walking on glass with just one glance. I didn't see what was so intimidating about Bennett, but after inspecting the men I realized they were all wearing name tags.

"We didn't know you were stopping by," the first guy spoke, his eyes wide. "Y-your mother is out of town."

"We implemented the no smoking rule to keep our guests with respiration problems safe. It's not a suggestion. It's a rule. I expect my employees to follow the rules of the establishment at the very least," Bennett said, speaking with a tone of authority.

"We're sorry," another guy spoke up.

I looked up at Bennett and almost didn't recognize him. His stern expression made him look older in a way. Was this how he was with all his employees? Was he about to fire these guys?

"I know our customers are stressful, but if you need a cigarette that badly please use the employee courtyard and not stand in front of the entrance. Use your heads." His words were harsh, but his expression finally softened. "I'm assuming you four are on your break. Please continue it in the courtyard. If I catch you doing this again, I won't just warn you."

The men nodded and quickly disappeared into the building and we followed in after them, the door being held open by another hotel attendant who greeted Bennett by name.

"Those guys are lucky I caught them and not my mother," Bennett said as we strolled through the lobby.

I only half-focused on his words, too distracted by the interior design of the hotel. It was beautiful. Everything was sleek and modern. The floors were made out of white marble, with some patterns made with brown tiles mixed in. The walls were a deep brown with white trimming and the ceiling was high.

"They seem to have fearful respect of you," I said. Serious Bennett was kind of hot. I wagered most of the female employees fawned over him.

"That's how all good boss-employee relationships work."

I thought of my boss at Coffee House and could've disagreed, but I didn't. He wasn't like most bosses, anyway. We were more like good buddies. Most places were more professional.

"Let's head to the elevator," Bennett said and guided me to the far back corner of the lobby.

"You don't have to announce that you're here or anything?" It wouldn't have surprised me if he did— he probably loved everyone knowing who he was and hanging all over him.

"I'm not here for work today," he answered with a smile. "I'm here on a date."

Kind of a cheesy answer, but I started to smile back at him before quickly looking away. It wasn't even a real date. I couldn't get too carried away. "Where's the restaurant? Upstairs?"

"It's on the rooftop."

"The *roof*?" I repeated. That was like twenty stories up!

Bennett laughed at my reaction. "It's not all the way at the top. We have a couple of spots where there are rooftop patios. The middle one holds the restaurant."

"Oh. Alright."

"What a world this must be to you."

I gave him a dirty look. "It's just a hotel."

His smile faded and I stepped away from him a bit. The record so far was three minutes.

The ride up in the elevator was tense. I wondered if I'd offended Bennett with my comment, but I didn't really care. He offended me almost every time he opened his mouth. When the elevator dinged signaling our arrival on the tenth floor, he moved closer to me again, placing his

hand on my waist. "I'm counting on you," he said.

I hooked my arm through his in response. As much as I'd like to do something embarrassing to him on purpose, I wouldn't. This was my job. I would do my utmost to act as a perfect girlfriend.

The elevator opened and we walked down a dimly lit hall, my heels clicking on the hardwood floors. I tried to walk lighter, but the sound was still deafening in my ears. I swallowed nervously as we passed a pair of stumbling women who were giggling loudly. They eyed Bennett and whispered to each other. I tightened my grasp on him.

We pushed through a set of glass doors and stepped outside and suddenly my ears were blasted with the sound of laughter and music. A gust of warm air brushed my bare skin and my mouth fell a little. The lights from the city twinkled all around us, only blocked by one side of the hotel towering above us. There were pillars put up sporadically with little lantern lights hanging from them, emitting a soft glow. It was beautiful. The sun was setting now and I could only imagine what the view would be like when it was completely dark.

Wooden tables were set up on the floor, many of them right along the edge of the roof to give the customers the best view. On the side where the wall of the hotel stood was a brightly lit bar with well-dressed men and women mingling in front of it, drinks in their hands.

"Wow," I breathed.

"Come on, I reserved us the best table," he said, pushing on my back a little.

I almost stumbled forward but managed to catch myself. I couldn't embarrass myself now. Although with the dim setting I doubted anyone would notice. Still, I had to be careful.

As we passed the bar, the bartender called out to Bennett and a couple of other people turned their heads. I straightened my back, preparing myself for human interaction.

"Who's the foxy lady?" the bartender asked cheekily, raising his eyebrows at me. He bared his white teeth at me with a wide grin, contrasting against his golden complexion. His black hair was styled high. He was very attractive.

"This is my girlfriend, Henley," Bennett said, not even with slight hesitation. He must be a good liar. "Henley, this is our bartender Eugene."

"You're Bennett's *girlfriend*?" Eugene repeated, his eyebrows going up even further, if possible.

I smiled bashfully, avoiding his gaze.
"Y-yeah." *Smooth, Henley. Smooth.*

"Wow," he said. "Wow, wow, wow. Never thought this day would come. How did you guys meet? A bar? Through a business partner? Don't tell me a book club."

Bennett cleared his throat, looking a little uncomfortable. "*Eugene.*"

Eugene laughed and then spread his arms. "Alright, alright. I'll stop. What would you like to drink, Ms. Henley? It's on me since you have to put up with this guy all night."

A drink? "Uh, wine is fine," I answered immediately. Alcohol would definitely help me get through the night and wine was the classiest thing I could think of.

"Bring her our best bottle," Bennett ordered. "I want her to try something she's never dreamed of drinking before."

Eugene nodded while I tried not to let the smile slip off my face. Yes, alcohol was a very good idea.

"Mr. Calloway, what in the world are you doing here?" a new voice spoke up.

Bennett and I turned to see a balding man in a business suit beaming at us. "I'm on a date," Bennett informed the man.

He chuckled. "Ah, it must be nice to be young. I wasn't aware you were dating anyone. Your mother hasn't mentioned anything."

"It's new."

"Don't let him bully you, okay?" the man said to me.

I faked a laugh and tightened my grasp on Bennett. It was already too late for that.

"Henley this is one of the managers of our hotel, Mr. Sowlen," Bennett said and I got the hint to offer him my hand.

"Pleased to meet you," I said. "I'm Henley."

"A cute name for a cute girl," Mr. Sowlen responded, grasping my hand firmly. "Treat her good, Bennett."

Bennett chuckled and nodded. "I plan to."

Suddenly a new person appeared beside Bennett, eyes wide and amazed. "Mr. Calloway! It's so good to see you!"

"Robert," Bennett greeted him. "How are you?"

"I'm great, thanks for asking. Did you happen to have time to take a peek at the blueprints I e-mailed you? I've got some ideas—"

"Ah, I'm not here on business right now," Bennett cut him off, smiling suavely. "My apologies. I would chat but it would be rude to my guest." He gestured to me.

Robert finally seemed to notice me. I hadn't realized how unremarkable I was until then. "Oh. I'm sorry for bothering you two."

"It's fine," I said quickly. "Feel free to talk —"

"She's hungry so I'm going to feed her before she bites my head off," Bennett interjected, giving me a stern look.

I shut my mouth and managed not to glare at him. What was I, a dog? Did he not want to talk with this guy?

"Let's go have a seat, Henley. Before anyone else stops me."

He then led me away from the bar and to the other side of the restaurant and up a few steps to a few tables that sat above the rest. No one was seated in this section except for a man at a table in the far corner that sat along the ledge. As we drew closer to him, I realized it was Bennett's friend Sebastian.

"Henley, it's good to see you," Sebastian greeted as we approached the table. He stood up and held out a hand to me.

I placed my hand in his, a little surprised to see him. He looked just as good as Bennett, a fresh-pressed suit on his body. "Hi again."

"Do you remember my name?" he asked, eyes crinkling at the edges.

"Crab?" I responded, grinning at him.

He laughed. "Apparently so."

Bennett pulled out a chair, letting the leg scrape along the floor. I turned toward him at the loud noise and he gestured for me to sit, his face straight. I did so, making sure the skirt of my dress didn't ride up. Sebastian sat back down after I did and then Bennett took a seat opposite of him and next to me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked Sebastian. I thought Bennett and I were on a date.

"Bennett was scared of being alone with you so he made me tag along."

"That's not it at all!" Bennett snapped, leaning back in his seat a little. "I thought you would feel more comfortable if it wasn't just the two of us."

I wondered why he thought inviting a third person who was also a stranger to me would make it any less awkward. But Sebastian did have this calming aura around him. I already felt more comfortable.

"Is it cheesy to say that you look beautiful?" Sebastian said, smiling at me a little.

I touched my hair and grinned back at him. "Maybe a bit."

"Of course, she's beautiful. Would you expect anything less from those whom I employ?" Bennett said haughtily and thank God a waiter appeared with our wine just then.

"Sassicaia Red, ma'am?" he asked, the words foreign to my ears.

I took a glass and let him fill it up, immediately taking a sip when he pulled away. The taste of it made my face scrunch up and Sebastian laughed as he raised his own glass to his lips. "Not fond of wine?"

"No," I admitted, thinking about putting down and never touching it again for the rest of the night.

"Maybe this is too refined for her taste," Bennett commented.

That plan went out the window. I needed to get drunk. Fast. Bracing myself, I brought the glass back to my lips and took a huge gulp. "How much does this wine cost?" I figured Bennett would say over a thousand.

"\$250.00," he said instead.

I looked at him. "What? Really?"

"Our hotel has to be affordable to lower classes," he told me, swirling the wine in his glass. "Anyone can stay here so we need to make our prices a little affordable. Many of our guests view this as a once in a blue moon visit and will spend a little extra money on dinner and drinks, but if we raise it too high they won't come back."

It made sense, but still. "I wouldn't spend that much on a bottle of wine."

Bennett patted my thigh, making me jump. "Wouldn't, or couldn't?"

Ignoring him, I downed the rest of my wine. Sebastian grinned and eagerly refilled it.

Our waiter then brought over menus, but both Bennett and Sebastian already knew what they wanted. Feeling a little pressured, I pointed to the first thing that had chicken in the name. After he left I copied the other two men and placed my napkin on my lap.

"You must be really serious about fooling your mother," Sebastian started, leaning back in his seat. "Your own restaurant for the first date?"

"Best way to get the word out there. Someone will mention this to my mother."

"Why don't you just tell her you're dating someone?"

"Because then she'll ask to meet the girl right away," Bennett replied, suddenly looking weary. "If she met Henley now, she'd know immediately that Henley isn't to her standards."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're poor and have no college education," he told me. "Just by your clothing, she'd know that."

Sebastian grimaced a little and I forced a smile while gripping my wine glass tightly. "Oh, silly me. I should've known my *poor* would show through."

"The plan would fall through before I could even have the chance to claim that I was in love. That's why she absolutely cannot meet Henley before that. We'll have to fabricate some sort of backstory for you."

I looked past Bennett and at the bright lights of the city. How in the world was I going to pretend to be someone I wasn't? I wasn't particularly good at lying. I'd have to just stay silent most of the time. Or I could just pretend I was mute! That would work too. I could leave all the talking to Bennett.

"You're not in college?" Sebastian said, directing the question to me.

Sheepishly, I shrugged. I hated the way people said that. To each their own. Some people were meant for school, some weren't. "Uh, I haven't started yet, but I'm taking some classes in September. It'll be my first year since it's the first year I can afford it."

He frowned. "I see. Do you have any siblings?"

I nodded. "My brother."

"Where is he?"

I felt my throat close up and I almost choked. Bennett's eyes widened and he made a move to help me, but I managed to catch my breath. "I'm fine. Uh. Sorry. I don't really want to talk about him."

"That makes two of you."

This time Bennett was the one to tense up. I looked at him to see him glaring at Sebastian. "Don't start."

"Sorry, sorry."

"You have a brother?" I asked Bennett. I didn't know anything about his family. I didn't even know anything about him.

His jaw was clenched so hard I could see his muscles. And as much as I wanted to pry, I knew what it was like to not want to be prodded about something. Even though I was curious. Was it an elder brother? A younger?

"Ah, let's change the topic," I said quickly. "Anyone watch any good T.V shows?"

Both Sebastian and Bennett blinked at me. "Well," Bennett said slowly after a moment. "I guess you *would* have the time to watch T.V."

I ignored him and gulped my wine, deciding not to try and start a conversation.

The two men veered the conversation into business dealings and I zoned out, drinking my wine absentmindedly. This didn't really feel like a date. Did it look that way to other people? Was someone really going to care enough and spread a rumor? I suddenly felt kind of stupid sitting there in an expensive dress sipping wine I'd never buy. Is this what Bennett thought of me all the time? I couldn't blame him. I wasn't like him or Sebastian. I drank the wine faster.

As the sun went down, I got a little tipsy, and by the time we finished eating and it was pitch black out, I was pretty drunk. It didn't help that Bennett kept pointing out the proper way to eat chicken. Why was there even a proper way to eat *chicken*? I didn't understand.

"Henley, are you ready to go?" Bennett asked.

Nodding, I tried to push myself up and stumbled a bit. Maybe I was drunker than I thought.

"Maybe you should drink some water before we leave," Sebastian advised, standing from his seat as well.

I waved him off. "M'fine." My head whirled and I closed my eyes for a second.

"Henley, please keep yourself together until we're out of the public eye," Bennett muttered to me, grabbing my wrist.

I tried to yank myself out of his grasp. "What?"

"Don't embarrass me."

Now, had I been sober, I would've just taken this hit like I'd been taking hits all night from him. But because I was drunk and I was a bit irrational and a bit braver when I was drunk, I didn't let this one slide.

"Screw. You."

Bennett's mouth dropped open a little. "What?"

I yanked my hand to the side, escaping his grasp on me. "I'm so sick of you talking down on me. All night. Ever since I met you. I'm doing you a *favor*, you realize that?"

"I'm paying you," he retorted.

I stepped backward, my ankle almost giving out. I reached around wildly to help balance myself and Sebastian appeared by my side to help me. I latched onto him. "Paying me? Right, I'm your employee. Do you treat all your employees like this? I get it. I'm poor. You get all of your amusement from making fun of other people?" I continued.

"Henley, stop."

No. I was going to let out what I'd been holding in since I met him. I held up my pointer finger and walked toward him. "Screw. You." With each word, I jammed my finger into his chest. "All day I've been listening to your insults. Why should I bother listening to you? You're just a knock off of Paris Hilton, but more arrogant."

Sebastian snorted, but quickly recomposed himself. Bennett took a deep breath and crossed his arms and I think he finally got a little mad. "Henley, you're making a fool out of yourself."

I laughed. After everything I said, that was his response? "I'm done."

"Good," he responded. "I'll have my driver pick us up out front."

I shook my head. "No. I'm done with you. I'm not going with you and you can have your money back. Find someone else to pretend to date your luxurious ass, because I'm out." With as much dignity as I could muster, I turned on my heel and strutted down the steps of the platform we were on. I kept myself focused, determined not to fall and ruin my dramatic exit.

"Henley!" I heard Sebastian call after me. "Wait!"

I didn't stop and I didn't turn around as I stepped out of the cool air and back into the dimly lit hallway of the hotel. As the door was closing, I made sure to flip my hair in hopes that Bennett saw.