



One Weekend in Quebec City

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: "One weekend, one story, one unforgettable man."

Five years positioning myself as a celebrity journalist, and I've finally landed the story to launch my career to new heights.

My assignment? Spend one weekend in Quebec City with Spencer Hollis, the billionaire playboy who's as famous for his scandals as he is for his business empire. Spencer says he's ready to trade headlines for respectability. But from the moment we meet, I realize he's trouble—the kind that makes my heart race and my instincts scream.

One weekend was all it was supposed to be. Can I resist the pull of a man who's built for headlines?

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ChapterOne

Spencer

God. Whata long fucking day.

As I lean back in my chair, the leather softly squeaking under my weight, and shove my fingers through my hair, the faint remnants of cologne on my collar and sweat from my pits waft up to my nose.

An image of Mom pops into my head. The last few times I visited; she never mentioned my hair once. She prefers it short and neatly trimmed. Always has. If it simply grazes the edge of my collar, she openly criticizes the length, telling me I look shabby.

She hasn't said a single word about it since Dad's funeral. Even though I shouldn't be so concerned about something as superficial as the length of my hair, I make a mental note to schedule an appointment with my hairdresser.

The sun is beginning to lower, creating a stunning array of burnt orange and pink behind the New York City skyline outside my office windows. Most people have long since left their workspace and gone home to their families for the evening. If I had left work at quitting time like a normal human being, I would have heard the distant wail of a siren, the steady rhythm of traffic, and the ceaseless chatter of people spilling out onto the streets. But on the twenty-first floor, I don't hear a damn thing. And I only know it's well past time to leave myself because of the setting sun. And my gurgling stomach. I also didn't get to eat lunch.

I spin my chair away from the view and instead face the polished mahogany desk, its top scattered with various reports and documents. My computer screen has gone black, and even the light on the desk phone has stopped blinking. The walls of my office are lined with modern art and bookshelves filled with business tomes and family photos. I often wonder if Dad kept pictures of us growing up to remind him of his family waiting at home or the family he wanted othersto think he gave a shit about.

Father of the year, he wasn't.

The central air sends a cool breeze against my skin, a welcome relief from the stifling summer heat that clings to the city like a second skin. The scent of cold, stale coffee lingers in the air, a reminder of the countless cups I've consumed throughout the day.

My gaze shifts to the couch along the end wall. I need to get rid of that thing. I can almost feel the stench of Dad's indiscretions. It's like a thick, choking smog that threatens to bury me.

Most people think I don't give a damn about my reputation. In fact, they think I'm just like him. But I do care. The anxiety and tension of trying to distance myself from his shadow coil around my chest, tightening like a vice.

Today was another day like the meeting from hell a month ago.

"Spencer, we need to discuss your... extracurricular activities," Old Man Henderson had said, his voice dripping with disdain. He adjusted his ancient, wire-rimmed glasses, peering at me over the top of them like I was some kind of insect he wanted to squash. The man was ninety if he was a day.

"My what?" I'd asked, keeping my voice even though my blood had already started to boil. Henderson has been riding my ass since the last shovel of dirt landed on Dad's coffin.

“The models, Spencer,” another board member, Thompson, chimed in. “The constant stream of them. It’s... unseemly for a man of your stature.”

Unseemly? My father practically made a sport of sleeping with any woman who caught his eye—married or not—and these dinosaurs never said a word. But because I occasionally enjoy the company of beautiful, consenting, single women, women my own age, I’m suddenly a liability?

“My personal life is my personal life,” I’d ground out, my jaw so tight it still aches hours later. “It has zero impact on my ability to run this company.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, son,” Henderson had sneered. “Perception is reality. And right now, the perception is that you’re more interested in chasing skirts than securing deals.”

That meeting ended like today’s meeting—with me stalking back into my office and pouring myself a very large glass of very expensive Canadian whiskey.

Today they were pissed about some social media influencer who’s decided to use my life to increase her popularity ratings. She’s been sharing whatever video or image she can dig up and adding her two cents, painting me as a rich, entitled man-whore. Apparently, the world now sees me as nothing more than a playboy, a headline, a scandal waiting to happen.

They’re comparing me to my father.

In reality, I’m a man trying to hold together a crumbling empire, a son trying to bring back honor his mother’s name, and a brother trying to pave the way for his siblings to join him one day in running the family business if there’s one left to run.

God, I fucking hate this.

Shoving my chair back, I jump up, startling Linda, my assistant. Her eyes dart to me as I spin around to face the floor-to-ceiling window again. My reflection stares back, a thirty-three-year-old man with too-long dirty blonde hair and eyes that look tired and slightly defeated. The cool glass against my forehead is a soothing balm to the throbbing in my temples.

Behind me, Linda sits in the guest chair, her spiral notepad in her lap, and a displeased look etched onto her face. Regardless of the hour, she's impeccably dressed as always, her aged blonde hair pulled back into a tight bun, not a strand out of place. The crisp, fresh scent of her perfume—something floral and sophisticated—hangs in the air, a subtle reminder of her presence.

“Spencer, they want results,” she says, her voice crisp and professional, cutting through the silence like a knife. But there's no harshness to the tone. In fact, she sounds sorry for me.

I glance at my watch and inwardly sigh. After today's marathon session, she must be as exhausted as I am, yet she looks and behaves as though it's nine in the morning, not eight at night. Like we just didn't spend hours behind closed doors, beating a dead horse, only to spend the rest of the workday holed up in my office, rehashing the entire fucking day.

Through the glass, I watch as she leans back and crosses her arms, her tailored black blazer wrinkling slightly with the movement. It's the first sign of relaxation since we arrived early this morning.

When Dad died, I wasn't sure I wanted to keep his personal assistant. If she'd been loyal to him and his bullshit and complicit in keeping his secrets, then I wanted nothing to do with her. I'm nothing like my father, regardless of what mainstream and social media want to believe. But on my very first day in the office, Linda stalked in, head held high, hair pinned back, wearing one of her signature business suits, and not

very subtly told me that if I intended to be a carbon copy of my father, she'd hand in her resignation, effective immediately. The woman is at least twenty years my senior, and I respect her more than any of the men who sat around that conference room table every third Monday of the month since the day I walked through those doors.

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Dad didn't. He didn't respect women at all. Certainly not the woman he exchanged vows with almost forty years ago.

After working with Linda over the last eight months, I'm convinced she's the only reason he still had a business. She's the one who's been helping me navigate the ins and outs of each line of business and detangle the worst of the mess.

I turn and lean my whole weight back against the window, my head thumping softly against the glass. My head aches. Has ached all day. Even the murmur of white noise from the machine I'd had installed my second week here can't drown out the pounding in my skull. Today wasn't my first round with them; it won't be the last. They just pushed every button I have.

Linda clears her throat, and I shift my gaze over to her. She locks eyes with me, hers steady and unyielding. "They want to see a different side of you. The serious businessman, not the party boy constantly photographed with a different model or celebrity on his arm."

I roll my eyes. The old guard believes I care more about keeping my supposed seducer persona than making strategic decisions for the good of my family's business and name. It's fucking infuriating. Since the moment I graduated law school, I've spent countless hours learning every aspect of this company, negotiating deals Dad would have screwed up. I've spent nights strategizing the future while juggling the relentless gossip mill that surrounds me. All while trying to keep Mom, Hayden, and Piper free of potential scandals or harmful news. Can I help it if I need to recharge sometimes? I'm thirty-three years old and single. I'm a healthy male who likes women. What's wrong with that?

“They think that just because my father had a reputation for casual affairs, I’m the same.” Those ancient assholes never said one word to Dad about his meandering eye or his bad decisions. Yet, the moment his body was placed in the ground, they began to double down on me.

I date. Occasionally. He fucked around. Every chance he got. They need to remember who keeps this company afloat and writes their paychecks.

“Spencer,” she says softly, but still snapping me back to reality. “You need to show them you’re serious. They think you’re just out for parties and pretty faces. It’s time to change their minds and your public image.”

“Do you actually believe the crap they’re saying about me? What the media says?” Linda’s disappointment, like Mom’s, would be a punch to my gut.

She tips her head, chin down, her expression one of sympathy. “You know I don’t. But a picture without context can’t tell the true story.”

Sure, I’ve probably been with more than my fair share of beautiful women, but that’s not who I am. And it’s not as many as they seem to think. It’s just a part of the narrative they’ve woven about me in glossy magazines and online articles.

Linda raises an eyebrow, clearly not satisfied with my silence. She rifles through her notes and then raises her head, looking at me pensively. “Hear me out. I’ve been toying with an idea. What if we bring in a journalist?—”

“I hate journalists.” Her gaze is steady and compelling even when I cut her off, but the thought of another vapid interview makes my skin crawl.

“You hate paparazzi.”

“Them too. Anybody who wants to stick a microphone in my face and ask stupid or embarrassing questions only to become purposefully selective in what they write because they’re only interested in sound bites piss me off. You can’t trust them.”

She ignores me. “We’ll get someone who works with celebrities. You can drive the conversation. A fresh perspective could change their minds.”

“I doubt it.”

“It’s worth a try. Especially if we’re the ones controlling the narrative.”

“I would be in total control?”

“Yes. We can ensure that’s the arrangement.”

I arch an eyebrow, intrigued. “Do you have someone in mind?”

“I do. Her name is Shelby Bailey.” She pulls a piece of paper from her stack, quickly glances at it, and shoves it toward me. “She’s talented, hard-working, and has a knack for spotting the truth in all the noise. I think she could highlight the business side of you without getting caught up in the infamous headlines.”

Interesting. “Keep going.”

“She’s not a big name, so she’s not working for one of the main streamers.”

“But that will mean she’s out to make a name for herself.” Just what I don’t need, another influencer type looking to find her pot of gold.

“I don’t think so. I don’t get that from the research I’ve done. If you partner with her for a few days, let her follow you around and get to really know you, she can write a

piece that we control. We can put it in our company newsletter. Share it with mainstream media even. Show everyone you're not just a pretty face in a designer suit. It might shift the board's opinion. They'd have to take you seriously."

I lean forward, my interest cautiously piqued, and take the page from her hand. It's Ms. Bailey's resume. "Wait, you said a few days? I thought we were talking an interview here. A couple of hours."

"You have a trip to Quebec City coming up to select cover models for the holiday edition of the magazine. She's Canadian. Canadians like snow—it's perfect."

I give her a look. "There's no snow in Canada in July, Linda."

"I know that, Spencer. I just meant maybe you could take her to the shoot. She might have some ideas. Even better, extend it by a day or two. Make it a long weekend, see the sights. She can be your tour guide."

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“It’s not a date.”

“No, but spending just a couple of hours with you won’t give her the whole story.”

“I have no desire to be a public relations puppet.”

Linda smirks. “You’re not a puppet, Spencer. But you need to convince her that there’s more to you than flashy parties and beautiful arm candy. Honestly, if she gets to know the real you, I think she’ll discover you’re not what the press makes you out to be.”

I mull it over, weighing the odds. “Alright. Reach out to her. But I want to make sure she understands what I’m looking for. This can’t be a total fluff piece. I need her to see the real Spencer Hollis.”

“Just don’t go falling for her, Spencer. Remember, this is work.”

What a strange statement for Linda to make. “And why would I fall for her?”

Linda gives me the look mothers give children when they’ve tried to pull a fast one. “Because she’s young and beautiful.”

“Trust me, Linda,” I reply, my voice steady. “I know how to keep my head in the game.” And my cock in my pants.

My phone buzzes before I can finish the thought, pulling my attention away from our conversation. It’s a text from Hayden. I frown as I read it because he’s asking if we

can have dinner next month. He's not supposed to be back in town for at least another two months. God, what the fuck did he do? He's the one that deserves the reputation. He's technically the most intelligent of the three of us, but that kid can't keep his zipper closed.

That ever-present sense of familial guilt creeps in. I hate Dad for what he put us through, and I don't want Hayden to become just like him. One day soon, he'll join me at the company, and we can't afford for his behavior to rock the boat. If the board members think I'm a treat to deal with, they'll all have coronaries dealing with Hayden's antics.

Maybe Linda is right. If I want to set the record straight publicly, then a long weekend with a journalist is only a few days out of my schedule. It's the least I can do to preserve our family's name. Then, once I have them off my back, I can deal with Hayden before he starts stirring the pot.

Chapter Two

Shelby

What a day.

The scent of old paper and dust fills my nostrils as I sit at my cluttered desk with the late afternoon sun slanting through the window, sending particles of dust dancing in the beams between the glass and the stacks of research papers surrounding me. I may be on the younger end of my thirties, but I love my paper. I may create on screen, but I prefer to flip through the final pages in my hands than scroll through screens. It's easier on my eyes too.

The cursor on my computer screen blinks incessantly, a steady, silent metronome waiting for the next set of words to flow from my fingertips.

Except my fingers are quiet today.

My latest piece, a deep dive into the comeback of a faded 90s pop star, feels... flat. Lifeless. I'd poured weeks into it, chasing down leads, conducting interviews, crafting what I thought was a compelling narrative. I even managed to snag an exclusive interview with the star's former manager, a real coup considering they'd had a bitter breakup. The manager now lives in a retirement home in Florida chasing little old ladies around the dining hall. At least he still had all his faculties and remembered her. A few of the big online entertainment sites picked up the article, giving me solid credentials to tuck away for the future.

But the response? A tepid ripple. A few polite comments, a smattering of social media shares, then... nothing.

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. It's not the first time this has happened. Five years in, the career I dreamt about still feels a long way off. Every profile feels like a battle, an all-out scramble for attention. Sometimes, doubt creeps in, whispering insidious questions in the quiet hours.

Am I good enough?

Will I ever break through?

I glance at the framed photo of Marika, Shaun, and my adorable nephew. They have it all figured out. Perfect jobs, perfect family, perfect life. I shove the unsettling thought aside, twisting a stray blonde curl around my finger. I'm not them. I'm not destined to fall in love with my best friend's brother and settle down. My brother may have made People Magazine's hottest doctors list five times, all because he blew up on social media when he gave a young girl a new lease on life. But one of my stories will grace Time Magazine's cover one day.

Just not today, apparently.

My gaze drifts across the room and out the window of my office in Kingston, the sounds of summer drifting in—children laughing, the distant hum of a lawnmower, the rhythmic slap of waves against the pier. Although the cost is a little steep for my wallet, the opportunity to work out of a tourist information building by the waterfront couldn't be passed up.

I shake my head, trying to dispel the creeping anxiety. I love what I do. The thrill of the chase, the power of words, the possibility of uncovering a hidden truth. It's intoxicating. But the reality of the industry is brutal. With the way media works today, so many people are vying for a byline in the same glossy magazine, whether physical or digital.

Returning the family photo to its place, I turn back to my computer, the faint hum of the old air conditioner struggling valiantly against the oppressive summer heat. I wiggle my toes, the soft, slightly worn fabric of my socks rubbing against the faded hardwood floor beneath my feet. It's been a long day, and I'm looking forward to getting out of here, stripping them off, and spending the evening strolling through the sand and surf at Richardson Beach while I munch on a hotdog and sip a cold drink. I just need to wrap this up first. At least complete my draft.

My phone buzzes, vibrating against the scarred wood of the desk, pulling me from my thoughts. I reach over to grab it, the metal case only slightly cooler against my fingers than the air circulating throughout the room. Glancing at the screen, I see an unknown number while noticing the time. Who's calling me at this hour?

“Hello?”

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“Is this Shelby Bailey?” A woman’s voice asks, smooth and professional like expensive silk is on the other end.

“Yes, it is,” I reply, my heart quickening slightly.

“Hi, Shelby. My name is Linda Morgan. I’m Spencer Hollis’s assistant. Do you know who Mr. Hollis is?”

The name rings a bell, loud and clear, like the clanging of a church bell on a bright Sunday morning. Technically, she must mean Spencer Hollis Jr. since Senior died several months ago. He’s a billionaire from New York who owns a handful of businesses. When the patriarch suddenly passed away not even a year ago, his oldest son, Spencer, took over. From what I’ve seen splashed all over the internet, he’s quite the playboy, a man who makes headlines for being seen with a new glamorous model or actress every week. The kind of man I’ve dissected and judged from afar but never actually met.

“Yes. I know who he is.” I try to keep my voice neutral and professional like I interview the super-rich every day. “How can I help you, Ms. Morgan?”

“Mr. Hollis is looking for a journalist to do a feature piece on him,” she says, and my pulse skips a beat, my breath hitching. “He’s reviewed your portfolio and is very interested in collaborating with you on this project.”

A feature piece? On him? By me? This must be a joke. I’ve been working hard to become a recognized name, and this is exactly what I’ve been waiting for. When it finally happened, I thought I’d write a piece on a local celebrity. Maybe a famous

hockey player or Canadian actor. Not a Wall Street mogul. There are so many other people he could choose. Why me?

And then my inner voice reminds me not to look a gift horse in the mouth. This could be it. The story that gets me recognized. I should jump all over it.

But Spencer Hollis? The billionaire who makes headlines for all the wrong reasons? What's the angle? What does he want?

"I'm certainly interested," I manage to stammer, my fingers tracing the smooth edge of my desk, grounding me as I try to sound as nonchalant as possible. "What exactly is Mr. Hollis hoping to accomplish with this piece? Does he have a specific direction in mind?" I don't want to come across as inexperienced or unprofessional. Still, my insides are screaming, doing a little jig of a happy dance, while I keep my tone even, nothing to show how excited I am.

I hope.

I can practically hear the smile in Linda's voice when she answers, "He's looking to redefine his public image, Shelby. He wants to show the world there's more to him than the headlines presume to suggest."

Right. The man is handsome, rich, single, and happens to have access to dozens of the most beautiful women in the world. He's the very definition of the assumptions those headlines suggest.

"He's traveling to Quebec City next weekend," she continues. "And if you're amenable, he'd like to conduct the interview there. You'd have access to him for three days—Friday evening through Sunday evening. Of course, he's there for business, but you'll be able to watch him work part of the time and conduct your interview the rest of the time. You'll also be able to take photos that might want to include in the

article.”

Quebec City? Along weekend in one of the most beautiful cities in Canada with Spencer Hollis? And I get to write the story of my career.

I can think of worse things.

As I hold the phone to my ear, my mind spins with possibilities. Is this opportunity really happening? My fingers tap nervously against the desk. Can I manage this? What if I mess it up?

“I’m very intrigued, Ms. Morgan,” I say, trying to keep the eagerness out of my voice while my heart pounds like a drum in my chest. “Could you send over the details? I’ll check my schedule and get back to you.”

“Of course,” she says. “I’ll email you everything right away. We look forward to hearing from you, Shelby.”

I give her my email, and when the line goes dead, I drop my phone back onto the desk, the dull thud echoing in the small room. I take a moment to let it all sink in, a smile spreading across my face. “This is happening. I’m going to meet Spencer Hollis.” My summer evening ritual of walking along the beach while I reflect on my day and figure out my next move is long forgotten. My mind is already racing, the possibilities spinning out before me like a web. Spencer Hollis wants me. To write a piece on him.

This is wild.

I stand up, the old wooden chair creaking in protest, and pace around the office, thinking and plotting. That man has connections everywhere. Models. Actors. Highly successful and influential people in business.

This assignment is a gift, the type of assignment that could help my career take off if I pull it off.

I can't blow it.

After five years of paying my dues and making nice with dozens of celebs of varying degrees, I'm ready. Even if it means spending a weekend with a ridiculously gorgeous billionaire flirt. I'll watch him work and ask him a few questions in between his meetings. If I'm lucky, I can get him alone for an hour or two so we can really focus on the interview without distractions.

Pausing near the window, the wood of the sill warm and smooth beneath the tips of my fingers, I gaze out over Lake Ontario. The water is a glistening expanse of sapphire, the setting summer sun casting shadows in the distance.

The waves splashing against the stone pier below usually soothe me. Tonight, the sound excites me, quickening my pulse. Mom would encourage me to jump at this opportunity.

Dad would undoubtedly chastise me for keeping the window open while running the air conditioning. Even when the humidity in the air is thick enough to taste, I can never resist keeping my window open so I can hear the birds and listen to the sounds of tourists taking advantage of such a beautiful day or evening by the water.

I wish they were both here to support me. Aunt Eloise would tell me they're looking down, sending positive vibes.

Closing my eyes, I draw in a deep breath. The scent of summer—freshly cut grass, lake water, and the faint tang of barbecue smoke—drifts in, grounding me, calming me.

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“Okay. Here are the facts,” I say aloud as I resume my walk around my small office, the old floorboards creaking softly underfoot. Shaun tried to convince me out of renting workspace. When I worked for Marika, we ran remotely. But when I decided to tackle journalism full-on, I thought having a legitimate office space would make me appear more professional and encourage me to leave the house more often.

“What do I know about Spencer Hollis other than what’s been written in the press?” I start ticking off on my fingers. “Arrogant. Rich. Womanizer.” Those things are obvious and mostly things I try to avoid when looking for a man.

But I’m not interested in looking for a man. I’m interested in this job.

I pause and gaze at the picture on the corner of my desk again, the elusive wish that I might someday find my soul mate filtering through my mind.

I’m going to nail this assignment. Period.

Focus on my writing. Focus on my career.

I don’t need a man. I need a Pulitzer.

My phone buzzes again, breaking my train of thought, and I rush back to my desk, snapping it up. It’s the email from Ms. Morgan with all the details: itinerary, hotel confirmation, and travel options for flight, train, and rental car. A quick glance at the cost confirms it’s first-class all the way.

Auberge Saint-Antoine, Quebec City, Friday afternoon check-in,

Monday morning check-out.

Consider me booked.

My fingers fly across the keyboard, a flurry of keystrokes as I respond to the email with a breezy, “Thank you, Ms. Morgan. Everything looks in order. I’ll confirm everything by the end of the workday tomorrow.”

If I fire off the quick reply, then I immediately feel the urge to call Marika. Before she settled down with Shaun and had the baby, she managed a travel blog and became a popular influencer. She would know what to wear. If there’s something my best friend knows, it’s how to make a statement with clothes and accessories. Although, I have no intention of making a statement. The statement will be in my writing.

But I also need to tell somebody before I explode. I dial her number, and the ringtone fills my small office.

It rings twice before she answers cheerfully. “Shelby, hey, honey, how’s it going?”

“Hey, girl. How’s my sweet nephew?”

“He’s trying to walk.”

“Already?”

“Yup. And then all hell will break loose, because he’ll be into everything.”

We chat about the baby, Shaun, and the resorts they own before I get to the reason for my call.

“I need your expert advice.”

She laughs. “Of course, what’s up?”

“I have a location assignment next weekend,” I say, trying to sound casual. “And I need to know what to pack.”

“Ooh, exciting. Where are you headed?”

“Quebec City.”

“Nice. With who?”

Do I tell her? I chew my lip for a moment before blurting it out. “Spencer Hollis.”

There’s a beat of silence. Then, “The Spencer Hollis? Asin, billionaire playboy Spencer Hollis? The man whose family owns not only a modeling agency but also two production companies, a couple of magazines, and God knows what else?”

Her excitement only adds fuel to the fire. “Yeah, that Spencer Hollis.”

I can hear her walking, her shoes slapping against the floor tile, and then a door closes before she responds. “Okay, spill. What’s going on?”

I explain the situation, start to finish, from the phone call to my upcoming trip. As always, Marika listens intently.

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“So, he wants to revamp his image?” she asks when I finish. “Honey, that’s going to be a challenge. The man’s practically a walking scandal.”

“Tell me about it,” I scoff. “But this is my shot, Marika. I have to take it. Now, back to the clothes. What do I pack?”

Marika launches into a rapid-fire monologue. “Okay, first of all, you need something sophisticated but approachable. Think classic silhouettes, neutral colors, but with a modern twist. You want to project an image of ‘I’m someone you want to take seriously, but I can also have fun.’ Since you’ll be in old Quebec, and probably doing a lot of walking, make sure you take shoes that are attractive but functional and will go with any outfit you have. Even though it’s July, there could be a cool breeze coming off the water, so take a sweater. And take on really nice dress.”

“Why?”

“Because you never know when you’ll need one. And brush up on your French so you can impress him.”

We spend the next hour debating outfits, accessories, and what kind of shoes I need. “I’m a journalist, not a model.” My head is spinning when I hang up, but my suitcase is at least half-packed. I feel a little more prepared.

And a lot more terrified.

Chapter Three

Spencer

Relaxing on my bed at the Auberge Saint-Antoine in beautiful Quebec City, I'm channel surfing and looking for English news when my phone buzzes with a message from Linda confirming that Shelby Bailey has arrived and is checking into her room.

I guess it's time to meet my partner for the next few days.

I head down to the lobby, my footsteps echoing softly on the polished marble floor once I get there. The space is a blend of old-world charm and modern luxury. Antique furnishings, plush velvet seating, and the soft glow of chandeliers create an atmosphere of refined elegance. I catch my reflection in a gilded mirror and pause in my steps. Given that the flight from New York to Jean Lesage International Airport is less than ninety minutes, and the drive to the hotel is less than thirty, I left straight from the office and didn't change out of my business suit. At least I switched to a pair of dark jeans and ditched the tie the moment I arrived. I roll up the cuffs of my dress shirt and undo the top couple of buttons. My hair is slightly ruffled from laying back against the headboard, so I smooth it down, a futile attempt to project an image of controlled relaxation I don't quite feel. Plus, I still need to get a haircut.

I walk over to the reception desk and wait patiently until the young man who checked me in is available.

"Bonjour, Monsieur Hollis. How may I help you?"

"I believe my work associate has checked in. Can you please connect me to her room?"

"Mais, oui. What is her name, please?"

"Shelby Bailey."

Hestepsover to the free phone at the unattended station and looksupher room number.Oncehe's dialed, he hands over the phone.

I nod. "Merci."

The phone rings twice before it's picked up.

"Hello?"

The voice that greets me is warm and slightly breathless and at once conjures images of a sexy, beautiful woman rushing around her room, maybe in a bathrobe, wrapped in a towelwhilesteam from her recent shower drifts out from the bathroom. Eventhough curiosity tempted me to look her up, I decided against it, wanting to cometothis agreement with no preconceived notions. Butmy mind is creating all kinds of delicious suggestive ideas.

Her voice has a slight rasp, and I suspect a sense of humor lurks beneath the surface.It'sa subtle, unexpected contrast to the polished perfection I'm usually surrounded by. I don't know how I knowany of thatfrom one measly word. Butthat one word has every nerve ending in my body standing at attention. Myblood heats, and while I'm no stranger to dating beautiful women, something that hasn't stirred for some time comes roaring to life.

A small smile plays at the corners of my mouth. "Ms. Bailey? Thisis Spencer Hollis. Ibelieve you're expecting my call. "I turn my back to the front desk, my gaze sweeping the lobby, taking in the ebb and flow of guests, families checking in, couples heading out for the evening, businessmen and women huddled in conversation beforeheadingto the bar or back to their rooms.

None of it registers.

My entire focus is zeroed in on that voice at the other end of the line.

I can hear the rustle of fabric, maybe the soft sigh of a closing door. I imagine her settling into her suite, the phone's receiver tucked between her ear and shoulder, the late afternoon light catching the strands of her hair. I have no idea what color her hair is or what she has on, and my mind's eye is working overtime to paint a vivid image in my head.

Linda's warning comes to mind.

This is wrong. I shouldn't be thinking this way about Shelby. I don't know the woman. She might be married. We haven't even met face to face. This is purely work, and I have to remember why she's here with me this weekend instead of with a boyfriend or a fiancé. Yes, the anticipation of finally seeing her is potent, and it sends a thrill through me that I can't resist.

"I am. I just didn't expect it the moment I walked into my room." Her voice is still breathy, a little flustered, and it makes me smile again.

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“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to rush you. I can call back if you’d like.” I don’t like it, not really. For some strange reason, I want to keep talking to her. I like the sound of her voice.

“No, no that’s fine. What can I do for you, Mr. Hollis?”

“I thought we could meet for a drink, dinner maybe, get to know each other in a more casual setting before tomorrow’s business meetings.” And interview. She’s here to interview me. I need to remember that.

There’s a pause, a beat of silence that stretches out, filled with the faint hum of the hotel’s air conditioning and other guests milling in the lobby.

“I... ah... um... sure?”

“Is that a yes, or you’re not sure.” I chuckle at her confused hesitation.

“I’m sure. Yes. That’s a great idea. Just let me quickly change, and I can meet you downstairs.”

A wave of relief, surprising in its intensity, washes over me. “I’ll grab us a table in the bar.” I resist the urge to add something flirty, something that might break the professional barrier we’re supposed to maintain.

“Okay. Give me ten minutes.”

The line clicks dead, and I stare at the phone, entranced once again by a single

word—okay—and the sizzle of awareness it sent through me.

Ten minutes. It feels like an eternity.

The lounge, as always, exudes understated elegance. Soft lighting, plush armchairs in muted tones, the gentle clink of glasses. I choose a spot near a large archway and expansive window to have a clear view of the entrance.

This is work, I remind myself once again while ordering a whiskey. I might as well have it painted on a placard and posted in my line of sight. This is about changing beliefs, proving I'm more than a headline. More than a man with a large bank account. More than my father's son.

The glass feels heavy in my hand, the amber liquid swirling as I take a slow sip, the familiar burn a welcome distraction while I wait. Thankfully, the ice has barely begun to melt when I spot her.

I've never seen her before, yet I know at once it's her. She pauses just outside the archway to the lounge entrance, her gaze scanning the room. I can tell she's trying to exude confidence, and most would probably believe it. But I also see a smidgeon of doubt in her expression.

My breath hitches yet again. My pulse pounds so heavy in my chest that I feel as if anyone within six feet can hear it. She's nothing like the carefully curated, glamorous women I usually date. Everything about her seems... real.

She's shorter than the models I've been photographed with and has generous curves that fill out a simple, knee-length, summery yellow dress in a way that makes my throat, and my groin tighten. It's not form-fitting but flowy, swinging gently around her knees when she moves. Her dark blonde hair isn't quite shoulder length and contains subtle waves. She has it pinned back, but a few strands have escaped,

framing a face that is... perfect. And those glasses. The black frames should make her look serious. Still, instead, they draw attention to eyes that sparkle with intelligence and mischief.

Yes, I can see all that from where I sit because everybody else disappeared the moment she appeared. She became my focal point.

I force myself to look away and take another sip of whiskey, the ice clinking against the glass a sharp counterpoint to the sudden heat pooling in my gut because this is ridiculous. I don't get flustered by beautiful women. But I'm also not simply tossing around clichés when I can admit there's something about this young woman. I could tell from her voice on the phone. She's throwing me off balance. And it's... refreshing.

And incredibly distracting.

I make sure my breathing stays steady while I wait. A gentleman would stand and raise his arm, catch her attention, and wave her over. I guess I'm not the gentleman I claim to be because I want to watch her for a moment longer before she catches me watching her.

And then, when she turns in my direction and spots me, I want her to know I'm noticing. I want her to be intrigued as much as I am.

Like I knew her, she somehow appears to know me. She smiles and starts strolling toward me, gliding almost rather than walking. At least, that's what it seems like. She moves with a grace that belies the sensible shoes she's wearing.

I watch the subtle sway of her hips, unable to drag my eyes away from the way the soft fabric of her dress drapes over her curves.

She's stunning.

Not your typical runway model beautiful. Thank God.

Which means she's more dangerous.

I take a slow sip, the cool liquid sliding over my lips.

Suddenly, a hand enters my field of vision. "Mr. Hollis?" All traces of the breathlessness I'd heard on the phone earlier are gone from her tone. Her entire persona is focused, professional, and ready to get to work.

When our palms meet, electricity shoots up my arm. It's not the polite, fleeting touch of a business handshake. It's charged. My nerve endings spark to life. Everything around me ceases to exist. And yet, I don't pull away. Instead, I instinctively wrap my fingers around her hand and squeeze gently. Her skin is soft and warm, and the brief contact sends a shiver through me that has nothing to do with the air conditioning. "Please, call me Spencer."

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“Spencer. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

She pulls her fingers from my grip, and I shake my head sharply in an attempt to come back to my senses and clear away the fog of intimacy before gesturing to the chair opposite mine. I wait for her to get settled before I retake my seat and signal the server.

“What can I get you to drink, Ms. Bailey?”

“A glass of the house white is fine, thank you. And it’s Shelby.”

When the server comes over, I give him her order and request a refill of mine. Then we’re alone in a crowded hotel lounge, staring at each other like we’re the only two in the place. The linking of glasses, hushed chatter, and soft jazz spilling from hidden speakers fill my ears, but it feels like white noise compared to the woman sitting opposite me.

“Linda tells me you’re the right person to do this interview.” I lean back slightly, fighting to regain some semblance of composure. Working hard not to react physically to anything she says. To her sweet scent. To the brush of her bare leg against mine.

This is so wrong, yet I can’t turn it off.

She smiles, and I’m pretty sure my world tilts. Damn, she has a smile that could melt glaciers.

“I like to think so,” she says, her voice a little husky, sending another unexpected quiver down my spine. “I do want to thank you for the opportunity to interview you. I’m looking forward to getting to know the real Spencer Hollis.”

I can’t help the wry twist of my lips and the jab in the gut. “The real Spencer Hollis? Unfortunately, you might be disappointed, Ms. Bailey. He spends much more time reviewing spreadsheets than he does... whatever you’ve read about.” I pause, letting the challenge hang in the air. I might be attracted to this young woman, but this interview is important. I need to keep that in mind. If I want to right the wrongs of my father and keep the business afloat so Mom, Hayden, and Piper have something to rely on, I need Shelby’s article to paint the correct picture of the business world, the world at large, really. I need the board of directors to take me seriously.

“Shelby, please,” she corrects, unfazed, and takes a sip of her wine when it arrives, her eyes meeting mine over the rim of the glass. She cocks her head to the right and scrunches up her nose the tiniest, cutest bit. “And I’m a journalist, Spencer. I’m trained to be skeptical. But this is your show. I’ll absolutely tell the story of the man behind the headlines. But now, I’m also intrigued by the man behind the spreadsheets.”

That hint of mischief I’d glimpsed earlier is back, dancing in her eyes. My body responds without my permission, a tightening in my chest, a quickening of my pulse.

This is a terrible idea.

“Well, Shelby,” I say, leaning forward slightly, my voice dropping to a more intimate register because I just can’t seem to help myself tonight, “I promise to give you full access. No spin, no carefully curated image. Just me. Are you ready for that?”

Her blush deepens, a delightful contrast to the calm confidence she projects. She shifts, ever-so-slightly crossing her legs under the table, the soft fabric of her dress whispering against her skin, a sound I shouldn’t be able to hear over the ambient

noise but somehow do.

“I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t,” she replies, her voice steady, but there’s a tremor, a barely perceptible catch, which betrays her composure.

My earlier assessment nailed it. There’s doubt hiding beneath that cloak of confidence. Does she doubt her skill? Or me?

I raise my glass in a toast. “Then let’s see what we discover, shall we?” I keep my gaze locked on hers, refusing to let her look away. I know I shouldn’t be tempting fate, but for some foolish reason, I want her to be as off-balance as I am.

She takes another sip of her wine, her eyes never leaving mine. “I have a feeling,” she says, her voice soft yet laced with a hint of challenge, “this is going to be more interesting than either of us anticipated.”

“Interesting,” I repeat, the word a loaded promise. I take a long swallow of my whiskey, the burn a welcome distraction from the heat that’s now firmly settled in my groin. “I like that. You seem genuine. Not just out for a scoop.”

Shelby smiles and I can’t look away. “I’m not. I want to tell the truth, whatever that may be.”

My stomach drops, my balls tighten, and my heart does a funny fluttering in my chest.

Damn, this is going to be a long weekend.

Chapter Four

Shelby

“I want to ensure we select the perfect models for this year’s cover. Women, and men, who will grab your attention. They need to be relatable to our readers. And of course, given it’s a holiday issue, we need to plan for a winter wonderland shoot. The center spread can be festive theme. I hear it’s breathtaking in Quebec City during the Christmas season.”

Spencer’s voice, calm and steady, reverberates around the room. It’s not loud or demanding, but it has an undercurrent of authority that instantly captures everyone’s attention, me included.

God, the man is... something else.

When I spotted him in the bar last night, his focus was somehow already directed at me, as though he immediately recognized me even though we’d never met before. The intensity of his gaze reminded me of a lion lying in wait for its dinner. My breath caught. My body trembled. My legs weakened, and every ounce of saliva in my mouth dried up. No man has ever had that instantaneous effect on me. I nearly raced back to my room.

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Drinks were followed by dinner at the hotel. By the time we said goodnight and headed back to our respective rooms, thankfully on opposite ends and different floors, I couldn't decide if the stories about him were true.

He flirted but subtly. He refused to discuss business or his personal life, insisting we kept the dialogue light and neutral for the evening. Instead, we talked about world events, a little Canadian versus American politics, and the beauty of this city.

He's not what I expected. He's... personable. Friendly. Almost a little shy. I didn't get playboy vibes at all. Casual elegance, yes. Educated and knowledgeable, for sure. And obviously, the man has money. The tailored suit he's wearing today probably costs more than I make in a month, and he didn't blink an eye when he ordered an extremely expensive bottle of wine last night.

But he also didn't glance at a single woman all evening. Not one. Well, one, me, but plenty of beautiful women, more his style and speed, passed our table. He didn't turn his head in their direction once. And more than a couple of them tried to win his attention.

But it was the first night and only a few hours. I'm sure his true colors will appear once he's surrounded by gorgeous models and in his element.

That didn't stop him from playing the starring role in my dreams, though. I even woke deep in the night, the sheets tangled around my legs, my heart thumping, my breath heaving, one hand on my breast, the other between my thighs.

I shift in the cushioned armchair; thankful I insisted on a seat off to the side rather

than sit at the large table with his team. I don't want to be underfoot, and with only a couple of days, I only have time for a brief glimpse into one aspect of his day-to-day operation. When Spencer offered me a seat directly across from him, my heart skipped a beat as I quickly waved off the gesture. Every nerve in my body vibrated from such a simple look that I suggested taking up minimal space so I could observe from a safe distance.

Sitting that close? Staring at his mouth all day. Smelling that smoky cologne? Professional journalists should be able to do that and not completely lose themselves. Well, maybe. But not me, not today.

Not wanting to cause any distraction by tapping on keys, I even left my laptop in the room and opted instead for a pen and my trusty notebook. I try to appear engrossed in work, the pen scratching across the paper as I make notes. Useless scribbles, actually. Even a few doodles. Anything to avoid looking directly at him, which, of course, means I am looking at him. Right now.

Don't stare.

It may appear to anyone, except those who know me best, that I'm completely enraptured with his choice of words. In reality, my entire brain is racing a million miles a minute while I gawk at him and not the notes in my lap.

Even though his assistant's email said the weekend would be casual, he's anything but. Today's black suit is impeccable, the fabric hugging his broad shoulders and tapering to his trim waist. The crisp white shirt beneath provides a tantalizing contrast to his subtly tanned skin, and the perfectly knotted tie adds a touch of formality that's both intimidating and alluring. This is an entirely different beast than the laid-back, if still wealthy-looking, billionaire who had me melting in my chair with the insane desire to run my fingers down his muscled thighs covered in soft-looking jeans only last night. And those tiny dark upper chest hairs that were peeking out from between

the edges of his unbuttoned pin-striped shirt—I figuratively bit down on my knuckle.

I'd been prepared to meet a version of the man I'd seen in countless tabloids—the arrogant, entitled flirt. Someone used to getting whatever he wants, with no thought to anything, or anybody else. But here he is, leading a surprisingly collaborative discussion. He includes every person and requests their opinion, actively engaging the entire team. And when they share their thoughts and recommendations, they don't act like they fear the man but genuinely have affection and respect for him. They don't toss out ideas, assuming he'll simply do what he wants. He actually listens and considers them. In fact, most of the discussion so far has been Spencer leaning into suggestions from those around the table.

They must be crushing on him hard.

Or is it just me?

The thought pops into my mind, and at once, a smile appears. I should be ashamed. Women hate it when men lust after them like I'm drooling over this man. But he doesn't need to know. What happens in my brain stays in my brain. It can be fodder for tonight.

I need to remember that I'm here to work. Spencer Hollis is just a stepping stone in my career. Sure, I hope that my future in celebrity journalism will change for the better with his help. He's a means to an end. A story. That's it. No matter how much my traitorous body and spicy fantasies seem to disagree. Or how my pulse quickens every time he catches my eye. How my breath hitches when he says my name with that subtle, almost velvety drawl that makes me think of warm sand under my back on the beach, his hot, sweaty body over mine, the sun beating over us as he peppers kisses down...

“Shelby?”

Damn it.

I snap my head up, my cheeks flooding with heat. Spencer is standing right in front of me, his expression a mixture of amusement and... concern?

My mouth has gone drier than any desert. My body is tingling all over. Oh God, this is so embarrassing.

“Shelby?”

“Um... yes?” My voice comes out as a pathetic squeak, and I mentally curse my lack of composure. Fuck. I’m a professional journalist, not some swooning teenager.

His large body is blocking my view of the rest of the room and their view of me. Thank God. His lips twitch, fighting back a smile, I’m sure.

This is the man I was expecting.

Regardless, the heat in my cheeks intensifies. He leans closer, and his scent—that yummy, intoxicating blend of something woody and something... all Spencer Hollis—wraps around me like a warm hug. A delicious, dangerous hug that threatens to suffocate what little professionalism I have left.

“I was just wondering if you have any questions,” he says, his voice a low murmur meant only for me.

Questions? About what? The meeting? The models? The way his perfectly tailored suit makes my fingers itch to...

I clear my throat, desperately trying to gather my scattered thoughts.

“Actually, yes. I was curious about the...”My mind grasps for something, anything, intelligent to say. “...the criteria for choosing the cover model. Beyond the obvious, of course.”

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Smooth, Shelby, real smooth.

His eyes, those unfairly blue eyes, gleam with a mixture of appreciation and, dare I say, a hint of challenge.

The cocky bastard knows.

He straightens slightly, turning to address the room as he saunters back to the head of the table, but his gaze keeps drifting back to me as if to make sure I'm paying attention.

No risk there. My eyes are glued to his ass.

Caught.

He chuckles.

Asshole.

“That’s a good question, Shelby,” he says, his voice effortlessly commanding again. “Yes, physical beauty is a given. This is, after all, a magazine that celebrates visual aesthetics. But we’re also looking for something more. A sense of confidence, a spark, an ability to connect with the customer. We want the reader to pick up the magazine and feel like they have something to aspire to. Does this person showcase our product? Not just see a beautiful man or woman, but imagine themselves experiencing that same kind of adventure, that same sense of luxury and escape during the holidays.”

He pauses, his watchful gaze lingering on me for a beat longer than necessary, sending a cascade of shivers down my spine. “We’re looking for a story, Shelby. Just like you are.”

The room falls silent, everyone watching our interaction, and I feel like I’m back in high school. I shift self-consciously in my seat as Spencer casually strolls back to his original spot and returns to business.

Then, I realize what just happened.

He did that intentionally to showcase his command of not just the business at hand but also those who are with him, me included. The man knows how to work a room. And he knows his business.

And then, because that thought is given an opening to slither its way to the forefront, my mind goes there immediately. Am I here for an exclusive with him, or just to feed his ego? Maybe he’s a bit of an asshole.

Tension, both professional and otherwise, fills me. For a brief second, I’m back in Kingston in my tiny office, staring at the lake outside. If my parents were alive to bear witness, they would no doubt be mortified by what I just did in front of this man’s entire team.

But what I see right now in my mind is not them, but Marika’s grinning face, no doubt reminding me to choose my wardrobe carefully so I can handle any eventuality, including the boss.

Hmm... maybe two can play this game.

Chapter Five

Shelby

While I sit and watch the rest of the meeting play out, this time focusing on the meeting and the businessman I'm here to interview, I take notes. It gives me time to come to my senses. It also leaves an opening for me to wonder if I've completely screwed up.

My mind, hell, not even that, but my entire body, has become a threat. It doesn't matter how much I try, how much I force myself to focus on each member of his team and what they're saying. It's as though my brain has split. One side is doing what it's supposed to while the other zeros in on Spencer, on every aspect of his attire, his demeanor, the way his mouth moves as he speaks, and his eyes light up when he's excited about a particular suggestion. All of my bodily responses are attuned to the man at the front of the room. Everything sizzles like there's a live wire under my skin. My body is warm. My breasts tingle. I feel flush just staring at him. I've never behaved like this before.

And I can't stop it.

This is a mistake. Why? Because Spencer Hollis is not used to rejection. And for the good of my career, I have to reject him. I came here to do a job, not to fuck the job.

"Shelby? We have coffee in the next room. Perhaps you could do with a top up while the models are getting ready for the test shoot?" Spencer startles me again, though I make sure it's less obvious this time.

He starts walking toward me, each step slow, decisive, almost like he's stalking me. Then he's standing right in front of me, gesturing toward the door but wearing a knowing grin, his scent curling around me.

Yup, the bastard knows I'm attracted to him.

“Um... “I respond, almost unintelligibly, which only seems to cause that slight turn of his lip to increase. “That sounds like a great idea. Thank you.”

When I stand to follow the others from the room, my legs feel a little unsteady, like I’ve been sitting too long in one position. Or maybe it’s the way he’s looking at me. I smooth down my skirt, a nervous habit I’ve never been able to shake, and offer a tight smile to the room, a silent apology for my earlier lapse in professionalism.

Spencer’s hand brushes against my lower back, a fleeting touch, barely there, yet it sends a jolt of electricity through me. I stumble slightly, and he’s quick to steady me, his hold lingering a fraction of a second longer than necessary. My skin tingles where we connect, the warmth spreading like wildfire.

“Careful,”he murmurs, his voice a low rumble close to my ear, his breath hot against my already over-heated skin. It’s a casual gesture, the kind a friend might make, but the context, the tension that’s been simmering between us since last night, makes it feel... charged. Dangerous.

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I manage a weak thank you, but my voice barely registers above a whisper. My cheeks burn, and I curse my fair skin and inability to hide my reactions. He probably thinks I'm a complete mess. A starstruck idiot. Which, professionally, I'm determined not to be.

Personally, is another story.

As we walk together to where the coffee service is laid out, conflicting thoughts are dancing around in my head. What am I doing? This is crazy. I'm here to do a job, not fall for my story's subject. But God, he's so attractive, so charming. And I can't deny the chemistry between us.

I note how his suit hugs his broad shoulders, and his eyes sparkle with amusement and concern. But he's a flirt, a billionaire. He's used to getting whatever he wants. I refuse to be another notch on his bedpost. I have to stay professional and focused on my career and my goals.

I glance over at him. Yikes. I need to be strong to resist this attraction. But how can I when everything about him reels in like some fish caught on a line, making me dream of more?

We walk through the open doorway into a smaller, adjoining room where a long table draped in white linen holds an array of pastries, fruit, and an impressive coffee service. The air is filled with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee, a welcome contrast to the boardroom's slightly sterile, air-conditioned atmosphere. I head straight to the croissants and the berry compote. Unbeknownst to Spencer, I already sampled the offerings earlier, worried that if I didn't get something into my stomach,

my hunger would make itself known and interrupt the entire meeting.

Spencer gestures towards the coffee urn. “Help yourself. I know you big-city journalists need your caffeine.”

He is obviously referencing my small-town residence in Kingston, but I don’t take it as a snide comment. There’s a teasing lilt to his voice, a hint of that playful arrogance I’d glimpsed last night. It should annoy and put me on guard, but it has the opposite effect. It makes me want to spar with him. To prove I’m not some naive small-town girl easily impressed by his wealth and charm. Although, it appears I am. It’s not his wealth; I could care less about his bank account. That charm of his, though... As they say, I’m apparently falling for that hook, line, and sinker.

“We small-town journalists need our coffee just as much as you big-city billionaires,” I retort, trying to inject a bit of playful defiance into my tone. “But we’re discerning. We prefer quality over quantity.” I reach for a delicate cup, avoiding his gaze, needing a moment to compose myself.

He chuckles a low, throaty sound that does naughty things to my insides. “Touché, Ms. Bailey. Touché.” Spencer pours himself a cup, the dark liquid swirling in the white porcelain. The cup looks small in his large hand. “Well, I assure you, the coffee here is of the highest quality. The hotel prides itself on it. So, no excuses not to have your fill, even if it might keep you up all night instead of dreaming of who knows what.”

The corner of his mouth twitches upward into an I-know-what-you’re-thinking type of smile, making my stomach twist with a combination of excitement and nerves.

I wish I could come up with a witty or snarky comment in return. Or, better yet, turn the topic back to work. Instead, I meet his eyes and stare back, unflinching, challenging his expression silently and without reservation. It’s not easy, but I manage

to maintain the look through pure will.

His right brow slowly arches, making me pause to recognize that his body signaled me again.

The man doesn't give up, whether intentional or not.

"So," I say, turning so I can look directly at him. "The model you choose for the magazine cover. Does that mean he or she gets a trip back to Quebec City?"

He arches his eyebrow in response to my little outburst, and a faint, suggestive smile spreads. He is not going to back down. It's both impressive and terrifying, all in the same motion.

"We've already narrowed the selection, and the majority will appear within our publication regardless. But yes. A winter story in Quebec City means we'll need additional content to create the full story and other supplemental articles. I intend to dedicate the entire edition to the holidays—food, décor, family traditions, the like. Today we make our preliminary choices about the cover model specifically and maybe locations. And then my team will bring those chosen back for a full photo shoot."

"So today are just preliminary shots? I mean I guess since it's summer, and we don't have snow year-round regardless of what some non-Canadians may think."

He laughs, and I melt some more. "Yes, we will take seasonal photos when it's time, but we can also use fake snow if necessary."

"Okay then. So, when will you have time for me today?"

"As in, when will the interview happen?"

“Yes.”

“Whenever, and wherever, you’d like.” The emphasis on that one word makes it even more obvious this is a dance. A game. A chess match.

I suck at chess.

My mouth wants to ask the questions, but my mind is spinning. Instead, because I am here as a journalist and not as a visitor, vacationer, or date, I turn back to the coffee and stare into my cup as I lift it to my lips and take a small sip to avoid staring deep into his eyes. I feel like a kitten stalking up to an experienced lion, ready to pounce but knowing I can quickly be tamed.

Or stepped on.

We’re outside the ballroom where the photo shoot will take place, so the air smells like fresh espresso and a hint of perfume from the models waiting nearby. Inside, the camera crew is setting up. Out here, everyone is hanging out, relaxing for a few moments before getting back to work.

Spencer stands next to me, his posture easy, but there’s a sharpness in his gaze as he scans the hallway. Even at rest, he’s always working. “What do you think of the models so far? Do any of them stand out to you?”

His question surprises me. I clear my throat, trying to gather my thoughts. “Well, I think they all have unique qualities, but to be perfectly honest, I’m still curious about the criteria for choosing the cover model.”

Spencer raises an eyebrow, a playful smirk on his lips. “The obvious being their physical beauty?”

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“Yes, I’m sorry I said that.”

“Don’t be. Beauty is part of the business. But we’re looking for something more. A sense of confidence, a spark, something that makes a model unforgettable in a single frame. The ones who stand out today will be shortlisted for the cover and editorial spreads.”

I nod, feeling a bit more confident. “And once you’ve chosen, what happens next?”

“Contracts. Some models have long-term agreements with us. Others are booked per shoot. Their pay depends on experience, exclusivity, and usage rights. A cover model, for example, earns more because their image drives sales. If we want to use the shots for more than just the magazine—ads, social media, promotional campaigns—that’s a separate negotiation.”

I take notes furiously in my notebook, pausing briefly to look at him. “And what if a model doesn’t meet your expectations? Do you have a plan B?”

“We always have a plan B. But I prefer to trust my instincts. I believe in giving people a chance to prove themselves.”

Spencer’s eyes never leave mine; he’s caught me in a snare, and heat spreads through me. The tension between us is palpable, a mix of professional challenge and underlying attraction.

Speaking of... I need to think about my job, so I change the subject. I take a sip of my coffee, then look up at him. “So, walk me through it. What does it take to plan a

shoot like this? Or an entire edition of the magazine?”

He nods toward the group of models huddled near the ballroom door. “It all starts with a vision. For the holiday issue, we’re selling more than fashion. We’re selling a feeling. Holiday magic. Romance. The kind of winter magic people dream about.” He gestures slightly. “Quebec City is the perfect backdrop. The lights, the history, the charm—it all feeds into the story we want to tell.”

I jot down more notes. “And today?”

He exhales slowly as if shifting gears in his mind. “Today is the day we decide who makes it to the final shoot. We’re looking for presence and versatility, something that makes a model unforgettable in a single frame. The ones who stand out will be shortlisted for the cover and editorial spreads.”

I watch as one of the models shifts her weight, adjusting the drape of her coat in a tall mirror set against the wall. “And the rest of the magazine? How far ahead do you plan all of this?”

Spencer smirks. “You’re already thinking like an editor.”

Heat creeps up my neck, but I hold his gaze.

“We’re always working ahead,” he continues. “Right now, December is in production, January’s plan is being finalized, and we’re mapping out spring. But the holiday edition is a big deal. It’s aspirational. People want to feel the season in the pages as they flip through them. The right cover, the right images—they have to make someone stop in a checkout line or pause mid-scroll.” His eyes flick toward me. “That’s why this weekend matters. Quebec City is giving us everything we need.”

I study him hard for a second. “And what about you?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“Are you getting everything you need?”

His lips curve, slow and deliberate. “That depends, Shelby. Are you?”

Before I think of a response, he turns to refill his coffee, the silence between us thick with unspoken words. It feels like a dance, this push and pull, a testing of boundaries. And I’m starting to realize I enjoy the challenge, the thrill of the chase. And the hell of it is, I think I’m the chaser, not him.

Maybe?

Have our roles flipped, and I’m completely oblivious? He is a billionaire playboy, after all. This could just be another game to him.

My head begins to reel because it all feels too comfortable and happening too fast.

“So,” I say, taking a deep breath and changing direction again. “Where exactly do you want me during the photo shoot? Watching the models work, observing, watching you make decisions? Back in my room?”

He turns to me, his expression surprisingly earnest. “Everywhere, Shelby. I want you to see it all. The good, the bad, the messy. I’m not interested in a puff piece. I want you to understand what we do here, how we create magic. And...” he pauses, his gaze locking with mine, “...I want you to understand me.”

The intensity of his gaze makes my heart skip a beat. And we’re right back to where we were a mere moment ago. Maybe at the same spot we started from last night in the bar. There’s a vulnerability in his eyes, a genuine desire to be seen and understood, at odds with his carefully crafted public persona. And it’s disarming. I want to peel back the layers to discover the man beneath the wealthy, flirtatious façade.

“Consider me interested.”

He nods.

I wait. Surely this moment calls for more of a response.

The pull is palpable and obvious, but I ignore the sensation and head toward the ballroom, knowing he'll follow.

Beyond the heavy sound-proof door, chaos greets my senses. Bright lights shine in one corner, and I hear the incessant clicking of professional photography mixed with the sounds of assistants scurrying, music playing in the background, stylists rushing models onto sets, all speaking a mix of rapid French and English. I try to stay put but notice I keep side-stepping to avoid finding myself in somebody's way, like watching a really good dance routine at a wedding. I step back quickly from a model hurrying in front of me.

Spencer's warm, steadying hand brushes against mine as he joins me. I stumble a little less and recover faster, but my pulse does its best not to let me forget that a man I want very much is within breathing distance. “Sorry,” I mouth to him quietly over all the buzz.

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I'm starting to second guess everything when all I really should want is for us to conduct a regular, professional interview so I can return home and write a glowing review of the shoot today and nothing else.

"So, what do you think?" Spencer asks in a low voice, his tone doing things I can't begin to decipher.

I stare straight ahead to remain professional while I give a polite answer when I really want to grab him by the back of the neck and yank his face to mine so I can taste the coffee he just drank, maybe nip at his lips.

"Oh, I think I'm out of my league."

Chapter Six

Spencer

I want to ask what she means by that, but the photographer chooses that moment to interrupt with a million questions.

The next couple of hours fly by as we work. Occasionally, I glance around the room, searching for Shelby. I find her talking to the crew, the models, and the team or sitting against the wall, scribbling in her notebook. Every time I watch her, she catches me and gives me a shy smile.

And I want to watch her some more.

Finally, we have everything we need and call it quits for the day. After a few final words with my team, I let them go for the rest of the afternoon and stroll over to where Shelby is waiting for me.

“Well, that was intense,” she says as she follows me back to the conference room from the ballroom. She’s clutching her now-empty coffee mug like a lifeline. Her notepad is tucked under her arm, probably filled with scribbled observations and half-formed questions.

She’s one of the prettiest women I’ve seen in a long time. And genuine. I’ve known her for less than twenty-four hours and want to know everything about her. What’s her favorite movie? Her fondest memory? Does she have siblings? What are her parents like? Where did she grow up?

The room feels enormous and silent, with just the two of us in it. She drops into one of the chairs, and I drop my things on the polished table and turn to lean against the edge with my arms crossed, trying for a sexy half-smile, hoping she’ll relax and let me pepper her with my questions in between hers.

She’s got gorgeous eyes. They’re big and expressive. I can see every feeling and thought in there. This woman does not have a poker face.

“Intense is one word for it,” I agree. “Did you find it enlightening, exciting?”

“Definitely. It’s different than what I expected.” She gestures vaguely with her empty mug. “I mean, you weren’t, you know... ordering people around, making outrageous demands, acting like, well, an asshole boss.”

I laugh. “Disappointed?”

“Surprised,” she admits. “Pleasantly surprised.” And, okay, maybe a little

disappointed. A small part of me—the part that craves a good story—was ready for some drama, some headline-worthy behavior. But therealSpencer Hollis, at least the one I saw today, is far more complex. And far more compelling.”

“I should hope so. There is that saying—don’t judge a book by its cover. People have been judging me for some time now, without taking the time to get to know me. They’ve made false assumptions.”

“That’s why you want to do this story.” Her sober tone deserves a similar response.

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll promise to start with a clean slate.”

“Thank you. Why don’t we find somewhere a little more comfortable to continue our conversation?”

“I’d like that.”

We end up in a small, secluded alcove in the hotel lounge where two plush armchairs face each other with a small, round marble table between them. Sunlight streams through a nearby window, illuminating the dust motes dancing in the air. The soft murmur of conversation from the other guests blends together, creating a surprisingly intimate atmosphere. I wait for her to take her seat before sinking into mine.

“So,” I begin, wanting to get this over with. I lean forward, rest my forearms on my thighs, and zero in on her mesmerizing eyes. “Ask away, Ms. Bailey. What do you want to know?”

“This is officially the start of the interview. So, no topic restrictions at all, Mr. Hollis?”

“No topic is off limits, and please keep calling me Spencer.” I like it when she says my name in her cute Canadian accent.

“Okay, Spencer,” she repeats, her cheeks pink.

The slight emphasis, the way her gaze intensifies as she says my name, sends a heated shiver down my spine. And it’s a good thing I’m sitting in this position.

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“Let’s start with the obvious. Why now? Why this sudden desire to change your public image?”

I fight to keep any hint of anger from creeping into my voice. “It’s not sudden, Shelby. It’s been building for a while. Ever since my father died, and I took over the company, the board has been skeptical. They see me as irresponsible, the kid who’s more interested in models and parties than in running a multi-billion-dollar business.”

“And are they wrong?” She asks, the journalist pushing for honesty, even if it’s uncomfortable. She meets my gaze head-on, her expression earnest.

“They’re not entirely wrong. I enjoy life. I’m single. I’ve dated some beautiful women. I like to have fun every now and then. But that’s not all I am. I’ve worked hard to get where I am. I care deeply about this company, about my family’s legacy.”

She makes notes while I try to put order to my racing thoughts.

I glance down at the page, allowing myself a moment of contemplation.

“Talk to me about your family,” she murmurs, slowly raising her eyes back to mine.

I sigh, leaning back in my chair. “My family is complicated. My father built an empire, but he also left a lot of messes behind. My mother is still grieving, still dealing with the fallout of his affairs. She’s been ill, withdrawn from the public eye.”

Shelby nods, her eyes filled with empathy. “And your siblings? How are they involved in the business?”

“Hayden, my younger brother, well, he’s brilliant, but he’s also reckless. He’s been off ‘finding himself,’ traveling, experiencing life. He’s not ready to take on a big role in the company yet, but I know he has the potential to be a valuable asset. He just needs to grow up a bit.”

“And your sister, Piper?”

My heart and voice soften when I think of my sister. “Piper is the baby of the family. She’s only twenty-one, still in school. She’s got a great head for business, but she’s not ready to step into a leadership role yet. I’m trying to give her the time and space she needs to grow, to find her own path.”

“And what about you? How do you balance their needs with the demands of the business?”

I run a hand through my hair, a gesture of frustration and determination. “It’s a constant juggling act. I want to protect them, to give them the best chances to succeed. But I also need to keep the company afloat, right some wrongs, gain back the trust and respect my family name deserves. I want that for my mother. It’s a lot of pressure, but I’m determined.”

Shelby looks up, her eyes filled with admiration. “You’re doing an amazing job, Spencer. It’s clear that you care deeply about your family and the business. Your dedication is inspiring.”

“Thank you. It means a lot to hear that.”

I sink deeper into the chair, the leather creaking beneath me. “I miss my mom though.” I scrub a hand over my face, rubbing away the weariness I know is etched into the lines around my eyes. Lines that didn’t exist before Dad died.

“I understand that feeling more than you think, Spencer. I’m sorry.”

My heart suddenly aches as a moment of true understanding appears in her eyes. The meticulously constructed wall I usually present to the world cracks. “You do, don’t you?”

“My parents died a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

She offers a polite smile. “Let’s get back to you.”

I want to ask more questions. But I let it slide for the moment.

I don’t want to get into the sordid details, but I did say there were no off-limits topics. “My father had an affair, many affairs. His last one caused a significant scandal. Although she never said a word, I think Mom knew. But the one that ruined everything did her in. She became ill. He died. She withdrew completely from her public life, grieving and embarrassed.”

“She still loved him.”

“They’d been together over forty years.”

“When did the affairs start?”

I shrug. I really don’t know. And it doesn’t matter. He hurt the one person he’d promised to love and cherish.

“So, you’re trying to hold the fort until Hayden steps up to help.” Her smile is sweet, conveying genuine empathy for the situation. “Tell me about work. Why do you need

to clean up your persona?”

“Everyone—the media, business associates, the board of directors—they all want to lump me in with my dad’s bullshit. They think I’m his clone, and I’m not. I would never do the things he did. I’d never treat women the way he did. Certainly not my wife... when I have one. I’m not him. But they continue to paint me with the same brush.” My words are laced with raw, simmering anger lurking beneath the surface for months.

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She pauses, pen hovering above the notepad, and lifts her head. “Keep going.” I can tell she’s treading lightly.

I notice my hands are clenched tight, and my knuckles are white. Inhaling deeply, I force my muscles to relax and uncurl my fingers. Uncrossing my long legs, I lean forward and look directly into her eyes, willing her to believe every word about to spill from my lips.

“I am nothing like him, Shelby. And I sure as hell don’t operate the way he did.” A muscle ticks in my jaw. “He cheated on everything. His wife, his partners, his employees. From the day I walked through those glass doors, I’ve been spending every waking moment trying to clean up the mess he left behind. I intend to turn things around so my mother can hold her head high again and my brother and sister have a legacy they’re proud of.”

She nods slowly as though the puzzle pieces are clicking into place. “The fact that people are comparing you to him must feel incredibly unfair.” She sets her pen down, giving me her full attention. “Especially when you’re working so hard to be different.”

My shoulders relax a fraction. “It feels like a goddamn prison sometimes. Like I’m chained to his legacy, and no matter how hard I fight, I can’t escape it.” I run a hand through my hair, the controlled facade slipping further. I haven’t even been as forthcoming with Linda. With Shelby, opening up comes easy, almost automatically.

“Let’s talk about Hayden.”

I welcome the reprieve, though I'm not convinced it's much of one. "He isn't officially with the company yet."

"What will his role be when he does join the team?"

"That's the problem." I growl.

I can see her journalist senses have officially sparked. "Is this on or off the record?"

"I promised to be an open book. And I trust you to be professional. I know you won't do anything to hurt me or my family with this article. Right?" I meet her gaze head-on and hold it, searching for any signs she's not the person I suspect she is. My skin tingles, and my heart thumps loudly in my chest. My cock twitches in my pants because I'm staring into the prettiest eyes.

"I'm not in the business of misusing trust, Spencer," she says, her voice surprisingly steady. "I'm a journalist. My job is to find the truth and tell it. The truth about you and your company. Not to create scandal where there isn't any." She pauses, adding with a small, challenging smile, "Unless, of course, there is scandal to be found."

I chuckle, the low, rich sound vibrating through me. "I like you, Shelby Bailey. You're sharp. And you're honest." My gaze drops to her lips for a fleeting, heart-stopping moment. "And you're incredibly beautiful."

Her breath catches.

This is dangerous territory. This pull, this attraction between us. I sense it. I'm sure she does as well. It's undeniable.

And it's completely unprofessional.

“You were starting to tell me about your brother.”

“I was. Sorry. I got distracted.”

She blushes.

“Hayden is twenty-seven and busy working his way through all the single women in Paris.”

“Oh.”

“Exactly. He’s more inclined to be like my father than I am. I’m hoping he gets it out of his system before he returns to New York.”

“Jealous he might tempt a few of the models?”

“Of course not,” I say, a little too quickly, a little too defensively. “I’m just cautious. It’s bad enough I have the image I do. The endless parade of beautiful women my brother entertains would be a feeding frenzy for the paparazzi and give the board members a heart attack.”

“But you date models as well, Spencer. I’ve seen the photos.”

“Sure, I’ve taken beautiful women to dinner. They’ve been my guests at events I have to attend. It’s a part of the publicity factor,” I correct, my tone serious again. “Not the reality. I’m selective, Shelby. I’m not interested in casual flings. I’m looking for something honest. Something real.” My gaze locks onto hers. “Something like what I think we might be finding here.”

ChapterSeven

Shelby

My heart pounds against my ribs in a frantic rhythm that drowns out the soft background noise of the lounge. He's laying it all out there. And, God help me, I'm falling for it. I'm falling for him.

This is wild. We've spent a day together, and I feel like there's more happening here than just an interview.

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“Shelby, would you have dinner with me tonight?” His lovely, deep voice makes me think of naughty words whispered in the dark while we’re tangled in the sheets, sweat drying on our bodies.

“Ah, sure. Absolutely. I mean we’re both here, we have to eat, so why not?”

“No, I mean a date. I’d like to take you out to dinner. A nice dinner. Wine. Candlelight. Maybe even soft music. Do you like music?”

“Oh. Um... I’d like that. I mean, yes, I like music, and yes, I’d like to have dinner with you.”

The way he looks at me... the relief in his eyes stark as though he feared I might say no.

“How about we take a pause on the questions, and you go get ready for dinner. I’ll make a reservation for us. Meet back here, in the lobby, in two hours?”

I nod. “Okay.” For somebody who works with words every day, my vocabulary is suddenly limited to very simple ones.

He stands, takes my hand, and pulls me to my feet.

I stumble and slam into his chest, a tiny puff of air slipping between my lips.

He holds me there for a moment before releasing me. But in that couple of seconds, I feel his heart thudding against mine. The warmth of his body heats mine. Our breaths

mingle until I'm unsure if I'm breathing him in or he's breathing me in. We stare into each other's eyes. In my adult life, I've never experienced a moment of such clear understanding between two people that, without words, could be so profound.

I want him.

And he wants me.

"I won't—" I have to clear my throat. "I won't take long." I step back, and instantly the loss of his touch leaves me wishing he'd wrap his arms around me and hold me against him forever.

"Take as long as you need."

"What should I wear?"

His eyes widen, and his gaze slowly travels down my body. He swallows hard. "Something nice."

I finally drag my attention away and head to the elevator while Spencer slowly strolls over to the concierge. He's watching me. I can feel it, but I don't turn to confirm my suspicion. Thankfully, I don't have to wait long. When the elevator doors close, I collapse against the back wall, my hand to my throat, my eyes squeezed tight while I contemplate what just happened.

A giggle escapes. When I agreed to do this interview, I looked him up. The images I found didn't do him justice. The accompanying articles even less so. The man does not match the label that's been attached to him.

As the elevator begins its flight to my floor, I can't help but replay the moment we just shared. The warmth of his body, the steady thrum of his heart so close to mine,

and the way his eyes searched my soul. With the cool metal on my back, I press my hand to my chest to keep my heart from pounding right out of it. Giddy laughter escapes my lips, echoing softly in the confined space.

Spencer Hollis likes me.

And, heaven help me, I like him too.

The elevator doors slide open with a soft ding, and I step out, my low heels clicking against the polished marble floor. I make my way down the hallway, my mind racing with a thousand thoughts.

What should I wear?

How should I do my hair?

Should I wear my contacts instead of my glasses?

I pause outside my room, taking a deep breath before sliding the key card into the slot. The green light blinks, and I push the door open, stepping into my suite's calm, quiet sanctuary. Leaning back against the door, I close my eyes for a moment.

This is crazy. I'm here to do a job, not fall for the subject of my story.

But Spencer isn't just a subject anymore. He's a man with depth, vulnerabilities, and a heart that beats wildly when we touch. I open my eyes, determination coursing through me. I'm going to enjoy every moment of this night.

I push off from the door and head to the closet, flipping through the hangers until I find the one really nice dress I thought to bring. It's a deep blue, the color of Spencer's eyes, with a neckline that dips just low enough to be alluring without being

overt. I lay it out on the bed, then head to the bathroom, turning on the shower to let the water heat up.

As I step under the spray, the warm water cascades over my body, and I can't help but imagine his hands on me, his fingers tracing my curves. I close my eyes, letting the fantasy play out in my mind. His touch would be gentle, his lips soft. Despite the water's heat, I shiver, anticipation for the evening building.

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Eager to get ready and not wanting to be late, I wash quickly, step out of the shower, and wrap myself in a plush towel before moving to the vanity. After wiping the steam from the mirror, I gaze at my reflection. My cheeks are flushed, my eyes bright. I look happy. I can't remember the last time I saw that look on my face. Smiling, I apply my makeup with a light touch, enhancing my features without hiding them. I want Spencer to be the real me.

I slip into the dress, the silky fabric cool and smooth against my skin. It fits perfectly, hugging my curves in all the right places. I opt for my contacts, wanting nothing to hide my eyes tonight, and curl my hair, letting the soft waves frame my face. Finally, I step into a pair of heels that give me just enough height to feel confident without being uncomfortable.

Taking one last look in the mirror, satisfaction courses through me. I look good. I feel good. I'm ready.

I didn't think to bring a clutch, so I grab my one and only purse and double check that I have my room key. I pause, hand on the doorknob, taking a deep breath. Then I open it and step out into the quiet hallway.

The elevator ride down is a blur, my blood pounding in my ears in excitement. As the doors slide open, I spot Spencer standing in the lobby, his back to me. He's dressed in a dark suit that fits him like a glove, his hair styled in that casually perfect way that makes my fingers itch to run through the soft waves.

He turns as if sensing my presence, his eyes rounding slightly as I close the distance between us. I easily dismiss the other hotel guests milling about the lobby, some

checking in, others lounging, possibly waiting to begin their evening out.

“Shelby,” he breathes, his voice a low rumble that thrills me. “You look stunning.”

“Thank you. You look pretty good yourself.”

He offers me his arm, a gentlemanly gesture that makes my heart flutter. I slip my hand into the crook of his elbow, feeling the firm muscles beneath his suit. The man really is gorgeous. From the corner of my eye, I catch a few female heads swiveling in our direction as he leads me out of the hotel to where a sleek black car is waiting at the curb. He opens the door, and I slide in, the leather seat sticky and cold against my legs.

As he settles in beside me, the driver pulls away from the hotel, merging into the evening traffic. Spencer turns to me, his eyes soft in the dim light of the car. “I hope you’re hungry. I’ve heard amazing things about this restaurant.”

“Starving,” I admit, my stomach rumbling not quietly enough as if on cue. I laugh, pressing a hand to my midsection. “I didn’t realize how much energy today would take.”

He chuckles, the sound warm and inviting. “Today was easy. It’s your interview that’s the hard work.”

I shift to look at him full-on. “Why would that be? You only answered a few questions.”

“Because I’m telling you things I haven’t told anybody else.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure how to respond to that. Does he mean because I’m a journalist or because it’s me?

The car winds through the streets, the historic buildings casting long shadows in the setting sun. We stop at a restaurant tucked away on a quiet street, the exterior unassuming but elegant. Spencer helps me out of the car, his hand lingering on mine as we walk inside.

The maître d' greets us warmly, leading us to a secluded table in the back. The inside is intimate, the lighting dim, the atmosphere charged with a quiet energy. Spencer pulls out my chair, waiting until I'm seated before taking his own.

The waiter arrives with a wine list and fills our water glasses. "So, what do you feel like having?" Spencer asks. "I'm told everything here is excellent."

I scan the menu, my stomach rumbling in anticipation. "In that case, I think I'll have the lobster."

"Excellent choice," he says, signaling the waiter. He orders for both of us, his voice smooth and confident, as we discuss the perfect wine to accompany our meal. Then he turns his attention back to me. "This time, I want to learn about you, Shelby. Not the journalist, but the woman."

I take a sip of my wine, considering his request. "Well, I grew up in Kingston. I have a brother, Shaun. Our parents died when I was young, so my aunt raised us. I've always loved writing, loved telling stories. I guess that's why I eventually became a journalist."

Spencer nods, understanding in his eyes. "I can relate to that. It's hard to find someone who understands the demands of our jobs, the passion that drives us."

I smile, feeling a connection growing between us. "And what about your personal life? Any serious relationships?"

Spencer shakes his head, a wistful look in his eyes. “Nothing serious.”

“Never?” I find that hard to believe.

He shakes his head. “I’ve been too focused. First on school and then on the job. I knew one day I’d take over for my father, so that was the agenda.”

“You deserve a life, too.”

“The women I usually date, also have an agenda. I’ve always wanted something real, something lasting. That’s been difficult to find. But maybe I just haven’t found the right person yet.”

My heart skips a beat, a sense of hope rising within me. “I feel the same way. I’ve been so focused on my career that I haven’t had time for a serious relationship. But someday, I’d like to have what my brother and his wife have.”

Spencer reaches across the table, his hand covering mine. “Maybe this weekend is just the beginning.”

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My breath catches, my eyes meeting his. “I’d like that, Spencer. I’d like that very much.”

Our conversation flows easily, the wine and the atmosphere loosening our tongues and relaxing our nerves. We share stories, laughter, and glances that linger a little too long. By the time our food arrives, I feel like I’ve known Spencer for years, not days.

The lobster is delicious, the meat tender and sweet. Spencer watches me eat, and it might be the wine, but I find myself enjoying the attention. My body is responding in a way it hasn’t on past dates. I set down my fork, taking a long sip of wine to cool the fire burning inside me.

“This is incredible,” I say, gesturing to my plate. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“It’s my pleasure,” he says, his voice low, husky, sexy. “I wanted tonight to be special.”

“It is,” I assure him, my voice matching his. “It really is.”

As we finish our meal, the tension between us builds a palpable force that seems to draw us closer with each passing moment. I can feel the desire growing, a need to be closer to Spencer, to feel his touch, to taste his lips. To have him touch and taste me.

Spencer pays the bill, and we leave the restaurant; the night air is warm but not humid, a perfect summer night. The city lights twinkle around us, adding a romantic glow to the atmosphere. Spencer takes my hand, his fingers intertwining with mine, a natural and intimate gesture.

“Would you like to take a walk?”

I nod. “I’d love that.”

We stroll through the streets, the cobblestones beneath our feet and the gentle glow of the streetlights casting a warm, inviting light. The city is alive with the sounds of laughter and music, the scent of flowers, and the faint smell of the river.

“This city is magical,” I murmur, looking up at the various historic buildings. “It feels like we’re in a fairy tale.”

Spencer smiles, looking down at me. “It does, doesn’t it? There’s a charm here that’s hard to find anywhere else.”

We walk in silence for a moment, taking it all in, while Spencer traces circles on the back of my hand with his thumb.

“I never thought I’d find someone like you, Shelby,” he says softly, breaking the silence. “Someone who understands me, who sees past the headlines and the rumors.”

I look up at him, my eyes filled with warmth and understanding. “I see you, Spencer Hollis. And I like what I see.”

He stops suddenly and turns to face me. He cups my cheek, his thumb brushing gently against my skin. “I like what I see too, Shelby Bailey. More than I can express.”

He leans in, his lips brushing gently against mine. The kiss is feather-light, tender, and filled with promises.

I melt into him, my hands reaching up to touch his face, deepening the kiss.

The world around us fades away, leaving us lost in the moment.

When we finally pull apart, our breaths heavy and hot between us, our foreheads resting against each other. “I want this, Shelby,” Spencer whispers. “I want you.”

My eyes shine with unshed tears. “I want you too, Spencer. More than anything.”

Chapter Eight

Shelby

The elevator doors slide open, and Spencer leads me down the quiet hallway, his hand on the small of my back, a possessive, protective gesture that excites me more than I would have imagined. I’ve had other men touch me there and didn’t feel anything.

He unlocks his door and ushers me inside. His suite is as elegant as mine, with the city lights twinkling through the floor-to-ceiling windows, the furniture modern and sophisticated. The room is bathed in a warm glow from the discreetly placed lamps. The scent of fresh flowers from a vase on the side table mingles with remnants of his cologne, a smoky, woody aroma that seems to envelop me as soon as I step inside. The plush carpet beneath my feet feels luxurious under my heels, and the subtle hum of the air conditioning is comforting background noise in the intimacy of the moment.

The door closes behind us, the click of the latch shutting out the rest of the world. The air between us crackles, and I can feel the depth of his desire even with my back to him. It permeates the room and would be suffocating if I didn’t feel it, too.

“Would you like something to drink?”

I nod, unable to speak, and he gestures toward the small bar area tucked into the corner

of his room. The bar is something I don't have in mine. It must be the upgraded version. The clink of glasses and the soft pop and fizz of a bottle opening are the only sounds I hear as he pours us each a glass of something. I really don't care what. I'm not that thirsty. At least, not for a beverage.

“Here you go.”

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I turn, and he hands me a glass, his fingers brushing against mine. The brief touch sends a jolt of awareness through me. I take a sip, the fruity flavor swirling on my tongue, and I can't help but meet his gaze over the rim of the glass. The Prosecco is cool and crisp, a perfect complement to the warmth spreading through my body, making me achy and needy in sensitive areas.

"To whatever this is... because it already feels like more than just one weekend," he says, raising his glass slightly.

"To finding more than I expected. And being brave enough to want it." I clink my glass against his. Not true words have slipped from my lips. I don't know where this courage is coming from, but I like it.

We stand there, the silence between us thick with tension and possibility. Every nerve ending in my body tingles, and I'm excited for what comes next.

Without breaking eye contact, Spencer takes my glass and, along with his, puts them down on a bedside table. Then he closes the distance between us, resting his hands on my hips, his breath warm on my neck as he breathes me in.

"Then let's be brave together," he says, his voice low and intimate in my ear. "No more pretending this is just a story," he murmurs, his fingers lightly stroking up and down my torso. "Not tonight."

His touch is light, teasing, but there's nothing casual in how he looks at me now. His eyes roam over my face in the darkness of the room like he's memorizing it.

“I’ve wanted you since the moment you stepped into the bar,” he says, his voice a rasp against my skin. “And every second since has only made it worse.” His fingers skim a path across the silk of my dress just beneath my breasts, causing them to perk up, eager for more direct contact. “Tell me you feel this too, Shelby. That I’m not the only one who can’t seem to walk away.”

My breath catches as his thumbs gently swipe across the tips of my nipples.

“I know what this weekend was supposed to be,” he says, his voice deep and rough. “But I haven’t been able to treat it like an interview since the second you looked at me like you saw something worth writing about.”

He slides his warm hands up my sides and pulls me a little closer—not demanding, just enough to feel the shift in the air between us. “I’ve spent years surrounded by people who want something from me,” he continues, softer now. “But you’re the first person who’s made me want to give more.”

I can’t move. I don’t want to. The way he’s looking at me—like I’m the only thing in the room that matters.

“Say something,” he whispers. “I need to know if we’re on the same page. Because if you don’t want this, I want to hear it now. And I’ll back off.”

I swallow hard, my heart pounding so loudly I’m sure he can hear it. “I don’t know what this is,” I say quietly, my voice catching. “Or what happens when the weekend ends.” His thumb draws a slow circle against my waist, grounding me. “But I haven’t been pretending either,” I admit. “Not since that first night.” My God, was that only last night? Only twenty-four hours ago? How can I be falling for somebody so quickly?

A smile flickers at the corner of his mouth—soft, almost disbelieving. He exhales, a

whoosh of breath like he's been holding it. "It feels like a whirlwind. I can't believe we only met yesterday."

"You scare the hell out of me, Spencer. Because this feels like more than just a weekend fling. And I don't know what to do with more. But even if you're only in it for the few days we have, I understand. And I'm okay with that."

He leans his forehead against mine, and for a moment, neither of us moves. The room is quiet except for our breathing and city sounds beyond the window.

"Let's not figure it out tonight," he murmurs. "I want you so much it's driving me insane."

Looking up into his eyes, seeing the raw desire, the naked need reflected in their depths, melts the reserve I may have been holding on to. "I want you too, Spencer. I want you so much it terrifies me."

He cups my face, his thumb skimming the line of my jaw, his eyes searching mine. "You don't have to be afraid, Shelby. Not with me. I promise." His hands slide up my back, slow and sure, pulling me fully against him. "I've got you," he says, the words a soft vow against my temple. "Whatever this is, I'm not letting it slip through my fingers."

He brushes a light kiss against my cheek. Then one just below my ear, lingering like he's tasting the moment. When he pulls back enough to look at me, his eyes are darker, more intense, and still full of that steady warmth. "Come here." Lacing his fingers with mine, he leads me toward the bed before pausing to turn and face me again. His other hand comes to my jaw, tilting my face up. "No more pretending," he says again, a little rougher now, the edge of need in his voice undeniable. "Not tonight."

His kisses are slow, deep, and certain. His lips are soft yet demanding, his tongue tracing the seam of my mouth, seeking entry.

I open for him, a soft moan escaping me as our tongues tangle and our breaths mingle, our bodies pressing tighter together. His is solid, hard in all the right places against my softness. He tastes of Prosecco and the tiramisu we had for dessert.

He turns me, never breaking the kiss until my knees hit the bed.

Kicking off my heels, I sit down, scooting back as he follows, his body covering mine, his weight a delicious pressure that sends heat coursing through me.

His hands roam my body, tracing the curves he seemed so appreciative of earlier, his fingers finding the zipper of my dress, slowly drawing it down. He trails kisses along my neck, his hands pushing the fabric of my dress aside, baring me to his gaze.

The cool air hits my skin, and I shiver, my nipples hardening in anticipation.

Spencer raises his head and looks up at me, his eyes dark with desire, a question in their depths.

I nod, my body aching with need, a level I've never experienced. He lowers his head, his mouth finding my nipple through the lace of my bra where he makes circles around the sensitive peak with his tongue before drawing it into his mouth and sucking gently.

I arch my back, pushing more into his mouth, a soft cry of pleasure escaping me.

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Spencer's hands continue their exploration, tracing the swell of my hip, the line of my thigh, before gently shoving my dress down and completely off. He kisses down my stomach, his fingers dancing along the line of my panties, moaning when he discovers dampness. His eyes are locked on mine as he slowly slides the lace fabric down my legs and tosses them aside. He reaches up to slip his hands beneath my back, and my bra quickly follows.

“You are so beautiful.”

His words leave me breathless. I want to see him as naked as I am. But he lowers his head, and his warm breath on my sensitive flesh banishes all thought as he begins following the line of my slit with his tongue before finding my clit and circling it teasingly.

Reaching out, I grab fistfuls of the bed covering, a cry falling from my mouth.

He begins to lap at my entrance.

I pull my knees back to my chest.

Spencer slips his hands under my ass and tugs me closer to his mouth and eats me like a man who didn't just finish a delicious dinner at an expensive restaurant.

He's rocking my world, my body spiraling as he sucks and licks and jabs at my core, devouring every drop I can give him. Then his fingers find my entrance, first one, and then a second as he fills and stretches me. The burn is exquisite. He pumps them slowly in and out, his tongue never stopping its wonderous torture. His eyes are

closed, his nostrils flared, and he's humming like it's the best meal ever.

The pressure begins to build, and I start to pant as pleasure coils tighter and tighter until it explodes, my body convulsing around his fingers as my cries echo throughout the room.

Spencer leisurely kisses his way back up my body, his lips finding mine, his tongue sliding against mine, sharing the taste of my arousal.

My hands fumble with the buttons on his shirt in my haste to feel his skin against mine.

"Let me." Much faster than me, he deftly undoes the buttons and shrugs out of his shirt before sliding off the bed and reaching for his belt.

But I get to watch as he undresses, my breath sticking in my throat as he's revealed to me. His body is a work of art, with firm muscles and smooth skin. I spot a tattoo on his right arm and catalogue that to ask him about later.

When he finally joins me on the bed again, I give him a gentle shove, urging him to lift his torso so I can trace the lines of his muscles and the planes of his chest before reaching for his cock, reveling in the soft, hard, heat of it in my hand.

He groans, his hips jerking into my touch, his eyes darkening. "Shelby," he rumbles. "God, your touch feels so good."

I enjoy stroking him for a few moments, feeling his weight and length in my palm, enamored with how velvety soft something so solid can be. When a bead of moisture drips from the tip, I guide him into place and moan softly as he gently pushes inside, slowly filling me and stretching me.

He stills, giving me a moment to adjust, closely watching me for any sign to keep going or to stop.

Tipping my head back slightly, I raise my eyes to meet and nod, letting him know I'm ready.

He begins to move using slow, steady thrusts that send waves of pleasure rolling through my body. It doesn't take long before he's pumping and rolling his hips more vigorously. In the elegant hotel room, all I can hear is labored breathing and our bodies slapping together. I wrap my legs around him, drawing him deeper, and my hands find his shoulders, my nails digging into his flesh as I quickly climb that trail of bliss again.

Spencer drives into me hard, his back rigid, arms taught, his grunts harsh as we both move toward the point of ecstasy. When I finally tumble over the edge, my body convulses around him, and I cling to his body, holding onto him tight while every nerve ending sizzles as if on fire.

Spencer follows me a moment later, his body tensing, his cock pulsing as he finds his release. Then he collapses on top of me, his breath ragged, his heart pounding against mine.

We lay there for a moment, our bodies still joined, as our hearts and breathing slowly return to normal.

He rolls to the side, pulling me with him, his arms wrapping around me, holding me close."That was... incredible,"he murmurs, his voice low, full of sex and something much more intimate.

"It was,"I agree, my voice quiet compared to the pounding of my pulse in my ears. "It really was."

Eventually, Spencer gets up and disappears into the bathroom. He returns with a warm washcloth and cleans me gently, his touch tender. I should be embarrassed, but I'm not. It's like we've been doing this dance forever.

When he joins me back on the bed, I easily move into his arms and his body curves around mine. I feel safe, protected, cherished. I feel loved.

It's not normal. This is happening far too fast.

Isn't it?

ChapterNine

Spencer

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The morning light slips through the gap in the curtains and lands across the suite in ribbons. For once, I don't reach for my phone. I don't think about meetings, emails, or anything waiting on the other side.

Instead, I watch her.

Shelby is still asleep, curled beneath the sheets, one arm flung across my side like she belongs there. And maybe she does.

Last night changed everything. Not just the way we touched but also the way we saw each other. I lift a hand and gently brush a lock of hair from her cheek.

She stirs, eyes fluttering open, and her expression softens when they land on me. "Morning," she rumbles, voice sleep-rough and warm.

"Morning." I can't help the grin that pulls at my lips. "You look good in my bed." That's an understatement. If only this were my actual bed, back in my condo in New York.

A flush rises in her cheeks, but she doesn't look away. "I could say the same about you."

We stay there a little longer, tangled in that silky silence that doesn't need filling. When I lean down to kiss her, it's slow and unrushed—like we have all the time in the world.

But we don't. Our weekend is just about over. Usually, I'd head to the airport as

quickly as possible after my work wraps up. But this morning, I'm thankful Linda booked my flight back to New York for tomorrow morning instead of today.

Eventually, I push myself up. "I've got a short wrap-up with my team this morning. Shouldn't take long. An hour at most. After that, I'm yours for the day."

Her eyes spark with curiosity. "And my interview?"

"Ah, yes," I say, mock-gravely. "The hard-hitting questions." I toss her a wink. "You'll have your chance, Miss Bailey. But I get to choose the setting."

We shower separately. But I'm not the least bit disappointed when she lingers in the doorway, one towel tucked around her body, another working through her damp hair. It's a small thing, but it makes something shift in my chest. I never thought I'd feel this content and relaxed around another person. A potential partner.

If it wasn't for my meeting, I'd have her back in bed, but work calls, and the sooner I get it done, the sooner we can spend the rest of the day together, so breakfast is in the hotel dining room where it's quiet and sun-drenched.

"You order. I'm easy." Her eyes sparkle with mischievous delight.

I order for both of us. And she smiles warmly behind her coffee as I ask for warm croissants, eggs, bacon, and a dish of that fresh berry compote I noticed she enjoyed so much yesterday.

She looks out the window at the courtyard. "This place is something else."

"Yeah," I say, watching her more than the view. "It's got a way of making you believe time moves slower." I don't tell her that's why I booked the whole shoot here. Or that I haven't been in one place this long without flying out for some emergency in over a

year.

And I don't tell her that part of me doesn't want to leave.

"Obviously you've been here before."

"A few times."

She leans forward, propping her chin on her hand. "So, what's left for today?"

"Team wrap-up. Shouldn't be more than sixty minutes. Then you get your exclusive. After that..." I pause, letting the words hang between us. "We make the most of the time we've got left."

Her gaze holds mine, but is that sadness I see in her eyes? "I like the sound of that."

An hour later, I'm sitting at the head of the conference table, my team gathered around me. Shelby is sitting in the same chair she did yesterday. Too far away. After last night, I'd prefer her close, where I can smell the shampoo she used this morning and brush my fingers against her arm. Listen to her breath and take comfort in having her close to me. Did she purposefully decide to keep some distance? And if she did, is it because I'm as much of a distraction to her as she is to me?

The room is filled with a mix of excitement and tension, the air buzzing with energy. And it's not just the two of us.

"Alright, let's go through the final selections for the holiday edition," I say, clapping my hands and commanding the room's attention. "We need to narrow down the models, finalize the location shots, and lock in the editorial content."

The creative director speaks up. "We've narrowed it down to three models for the

cover. Each of them brings something unique to the table. We need to decide which one best fits the winter wonderland theme.”

I scan the images on the table. “Walk me through their portfolios. What are their strengths and weaknesses?”

We discuss each model, weighing their pros and cons. I listen intently, asking questions and offering insights. The decision is tough, but we must choose the one who will make the biggest impact.

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“I think we should go with Model A,” I finally decide. “She fits the theme perfectly and has a strong presence that will capture the readers’ attention.”

Everyone nods in agreement, and we move on to the next topic. The photographer speaks up, “We need to complete the list of location shots. We’ve scouted a few places that would be perfect for the winter theme. We need to decide on the best ones and where local businesses are involved, speak with them to get their agreement as soon as possible.”

“Let’s go with the historic district. The old buildings and cobblestone streets will provide a beautiful backdrop for the shoot. Make sure we have all the necessary permits.”

The team continues to discuss the details while I guide them through each decision. I’m lucky to have complete confidence in the people who work for me. But I still feel the weight of the responsibility and pressure to make the right choices, choices the board will agree with. But like always, it’s the thrill of creating something stunning that will captivate the readers and honor the legacy of my family’s business that drives me.

As the meeting wraps up, my gaze sweeps around the table, landing momentarily on each team member. “Great work, everyone. We’re on track to create something amazing. Let’s make this issue the best one yet.”

After a few final comments, we end the meeting, and I can focus on the woman sitting a few feet away, distracting me the entire time.

Over the last hour, I watched Shelby scribbling notes in her leather-bound journal. Every so often, her gaze lifts to meet mine, and the rest of the room becomes static noise.

She doesn't say a word as the others filter out of the room. She simply tucks her notebook under her arm and comes to stand beside me as I collect my things. Looking at her, I notice something quiet and knowing in her expression.

"You okay?" she asks.

She must have sensed something, and I hesitated a second before admitting it. "I'm realizing I don't want this weekend to end."

She doesn't tease me or smile like I expect her to. Instead, she reaches for my hand and gives it a gentle squeeze. "Then let's not let it end just yet. Let's go for a walk."

I take my things up to my room before we head out into the late morning; the sun is already high, and the sky is a crisp shade of blue that makes the old stone of the city walls almost glow. There's a slight chill in the air this morning, starkly different than the nearly oppressive heat of the last few days. Shelby walks beside me wearing a light cardigan, her fingers tucked into mine like they've always belonged there.

We wind through the cobblestone streets of Old Quebec, past the boutiques and bakeries of Rue Saint-Jean. She pauses to admire a display of handmade soaps and postcards in a shop window.

"Mmm... it smells like butter and sugar and history," she says, her voice dreamy.

I laugh. "We can stop for anything you want."

She glances at me sidelong. "You're just trying to delay the interview questions."

“Guilty,” I admit. “I like seeing you like this.” I want to give her anything and everything her heart desires.

“Like what?”

“Happy. Enjoying yourself.”

While we wait in line at Café La Maison Smith, tucked in one of the little corners of Place Royale, she pulls out her notebook. I order us each a coffee and a scone, and we find a spot on a bench outside in the sun.

“All right,” she says, pen poised. “I think I need a bit more info about your business. As I understand it, your family actually owns multiple businesses, correct?”

“Absolutely. The Hollis Group is all about content creation and cultural influence. We tell visual and editorial stories across various platforms. Think of it as a stylish empire shaping what’s next in fashion, media, and pop culture. We have two flagship magazines that drive brand recognition and cultural influence. The modeling agency was originally developed to support the fashion magazine and ensure control over the talent, exclusivity, and branding consistency. The production company produces everything from magazine cover shoots to fashion shows, influencer campaigns, behind-the-scenes series, documentaries on fashion or art, even scripted drama series. The whole idea my grandfather created was to allow him and his siblings control over all media content from concept to delivery. There’s even a publishing company on my grandmother’s side of the family called Kismet Publishing.”

“I’ve heard of them. That’s very cool. You’re quite connected, it seems.”

“I really don’t know much about Kismet. Only that I have a bunch of cousins involved in that world.”

“So, the models you used this weekend?—”

“Are part of our agency, yes. They work for the magazines and Hollis Studios.”

“So, they are constantly employed.”

“They are.”

“Impressive.”

“Didn’t I read that you went to law school?”

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“I did. And I thought that I’d one day be part of the company’s legal team.”

“What changed your mind?”

“My father died, and I had to step in and learn about all the operations. I discovered I really enjoy the creativity that’s involved with the magazines.”

“Think you’ll go back to legal?”

I shrug. “I’m still involved of course, and there’s plenty of legal issues that come with the magazines. This way I get to play in both worlds. Plus, I get to travel and meet beautiful women.” I wink at her.

“I’m pretty sure that’s the whole reason I’m here.”

“Not only.” Not anymore, anyway.

She blushes. “What does a typical holiday issue require?”

I pause to sip my drink, thinking. “We start planning six months out. The theme, tone, color palette. December is one of our biggest—it has to be both festive and elegant. You want sparkle, but with depth.”

She writes, nodding.

“This year,” I continue, “I wanted to feature something different. Something rooted in place. Quebec in the winter has a magical quality about it with the old-world charm,

lights strung across narrow streets, snow that doesn't feel like a burden. It's cinematic. Romantic."

"You sound like a man who's spent time falling in love with this city," she says, not looking up from the page.

I never contemplated falling in love. Certainly not with somebody I barely know. But in my gut, I feel different around Shelby. Better. Happier. Content. "Maybe I have."

Her pen stills, just briefly.

"We shoot in October to hit the December printing deadline. The shoot yesterday was just to narrow it down."

"And how do you decide on the final cover?"

"That's the hardest part." I smile. "We test. Mood boards, mock-ups, reader panels sometimes. But ultimately, it's a gut call. I look at the photo and ask myself: does this stop someone in their tracks? Does it say something?"

"And do you ever second-guess yourself?"

"All the time," I admit softly. "My grandfather had a vision. My father did things differently. He made mistakes, personally and professionally. Since the day I took over, I've questioned whether I was doing the right thing or not. I've had to learn about each aspect of the business, each individual company, and try to figure out what works in their best interest."

"Do you want to run them like he did?"

"No. I want to make them successful again."

“They aren’t?”

“They are, but not because of him. At least not the last few years. Thankfully his staff kept things together.”

She finally looks up. Her eyes are soft, but there’s something sharp beneath as she sees all of it. The good. The guarded. The man behind the name. “I think there’s more to your story,” she says.

After our brief recess, we wander uphill toward the Château Frontenac, the crown jewel of the skyline. Shelby insists on taking a photo of it from every angle, and I don’t stop her. I like watching her eyes light up, her hair catching the sunlight as she spins in place to get the perfect shot.

We duck into Le Chic Shack for lunch—a local spot I love for its elevated comfort food. And it also happens to be owned by one of the owners of L’Auberge Saint-Antoine, the hotel where we’re staying. Inside, it’s warm and welcoming, all wood beams and brick walls, with the hum of quiet conversation wrapping around us like a blanket.

We settle into a table by the window. The server brings us menus, but Shelby sets hers down quickly, eyes flicking to mine.

“You’ve been good about answering my questions so far,” she says. “But now I want to ask something that’s... maybe less on the record.”

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. “You’re not even pretending to be objective anymore?”

“I gave up the illusion somewhere between the first kiss and the last orgasm.”

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That earns her a slow, sexy grin. And whether she knows it or not, a promise of more of both. “All right, then. Hit me.”

“What drives you, Spencer? I mean really motivates you. Beyond the magazine, beyond the image you’re trying to create. Why do you do what you do?”

It’s not the question I expected.

I glance out the window. The street is alive—tourists with cameras, kids licking ice cream cones too fast, couples walking hand-in-hand like we did just an hour ago.

“I guess I like the idea of legacy,” I say slowly. “I want to make sure the family members that come after me have something to be proud of. I want to build something that lasts. Not just the magazine, but the stories we tell, the moments we capture. I want someone to open a December issue twenty years from now and feel something. Wonder who that model was. Imagine the snow. Taste the season.”

Shelby sits and stares at me quietly like she’s trying to read my mind. “That’s unexpectedly poetic.”

I chuckle. “You bring it out of me.”

The food arrives—burgers piled high, hand-cut fries, and a bottle of chilled cider between us. We eat slowly, laughing between bites. Shelby tells me about her early days of working with her now sister-in-law. And then, when that ended, how she freelanced in Kingston, writing fluff pieces and obituaries, and how she once covered a town council meeting where the highlight was a heated debate over squirrel-

proofing bird feeders.

“Riveting journalism,” I tease, and she throws a fry at me.

After lunch, we stroll along the Terrasse Dufferin, the boardwalk that wraps around the front of the Château. The St. Lawrence River stretches out before us, vast and glittering under the sun. Buskers play violin and accordion nearby, and the mid-afternoon breeze smells like summer, sweet and fleeting.

We stop, taking it in.

“I’m going to miss this,” Shelby says, almost to herself. “Not just the city. This. Us.”

My heart tugs. “So am I.”

“I leave early tomorrow morning.”

“So do I.”

She turns to face me, her expression suddenly serious. “What happens now, Spencer?”

I wish I had a polished answer. A line. But this feels like the kind of moment that deserves the truth.

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “But I know what I want.”

“And what’s that?”

“You. Not just for a weekend. I want to see where this goes.”

Her eyes search mine. “Even with the distance?”

“The distance doesn’t scare me.” What scares me is Shelby not wanting the same thing I do.

She doesn’t answer right away, but she steps in closer, her hand finding mine, her fingers curling between mine, warm and steady.

We walk back to the hotel slowly, not ready to let go of the day just yet. Neither of us says much on the elevator ride up, but it’s not an uncomfortable silence. It’s full of awareness of the hours left and what we both know is coming.

Back in my suite, she strolls over to the window while I pour each a glass of sparkling wine from the bottle we didn’t finish last night. The view is stunning, but I only have eyes for her.

When I hand her the glass, our fingers brush. She looks up at me, and there’s something in her gaze, searching and bold all at once.

“We leave tomorrow.”

I nod. “But we still have tonight.”

She steps in, wineglass forgotten on the table behind her. “Then let’s not waste a second of it.”

I set my own glass down, reaching for her, pulling her in with an urgency that matches the way my heart is beating.

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Her hands slip under my jacket, tugging me against her chest, and I kiss her like I already miss her.

There are no words, no hesitation. Just this connection between us, and the unspoken understanding that come morning, everything will change.

Chapter Ten

Shelby

His lips find mine in a hungry, desperate kiss, sending a jolt of electricity through my veins. We barely take time to catch our breaths because we both understand this might be our last night together, and every touch, every kiss, feels magnified by that realization.

“God, Shelby,” Spencer murmurs against my lips, his hands roaming over my body with a possessive urgency. “I can’t get enough of you.”

I moan softly into his mouth, my fingers tangling in his hair as I deepen the kiss. The taste of him and his body’s warmth against mine is intoxicating. I can feel his hardness pressing against me, and my body responds in kind, softening toward him, eager to accept him. I want to claim this man as mine, but how can I feel such intense emotions when we’ve only had a weekend together?

He breaks the kiss long enough to whisper, “I need you, Shelby.”

“Yes,” I breathe, my voice husky, almost unrecognizable. “Now. Please, Spencer.”

We stumble toward the bed, our limbs entwined, our mouths never breaking contact. I kick off my shoes, and Spencer does the same, his hands already working on the buttons of my blouse. I fumble with his belt, my fingers clumsy. My blouse drifts to the floor, followed quickly by my bra.

Spencer's eyes darken, and he licks his lips as he takes in the sight of me, bare from the waist up. He cups my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my nipples, drawing a gasp from deep in my soul. "You're so beautiful," he murmurs, his voice rough with desire. "I never expected this to happen. I know how the board and others see me, but God, please believe me, Shelby, I'm not what they think. I don't bed a different woman every week. You're different. You're?—"

I smile, my heart pounding wildly in my chest as I place a finger over his lips, stopping him. "I believe you, Spencer. I don't normally jump into bed with a man so soon either."

We shed the rest of our clothes with frantic urgency, our breaths coming in ragged gasps. When we're both naked, Spencer lifts me into his arms and lays me down on the bed. He follows, his body covering mine. The feel of his skin against mine feels so right, so natural, so perfect. I tremble.

He trails kisses down my neck, his lips leaving a path of fire that makes my skin tingle. The scent of his cologne, a mix of wood and spice, wraps around me, heightening every sensation. His hands explore my body as if to memorize every inch. When his mouth finds my nipple, I cry out, the sensation almost too much to bear. His tongue swirls around the sensitive peak, and I bite my lip to keep me from begging for more.

With my head back, my eyes closed tight, and my neck stretched taught, I moan, my hands gripping his shoulders, feeling the firm muscle beneath my fingers. "Please..."

He understands my plea and slides one hand down between my legs, where I'm sure he finds me wet and ready. His strong, thick fingers slip inside with ease, and I gasp, my hips bucking against his hand. The friction is exquisite.

He groans, two digits moving in and out of me, driving me quickly toward climax. "I want to be inside you." His voice is a low growl, vibrating against my skin.

"Yes," I pant, my body quivering with expectation. "I need you inside me."

Spencer removes his fingers and, before my eyes, licks them clean, savoring my taste, his eyes burning with passion with every swipe of his tongue. He positions himself at my entrance, his eyes locked onto mine. There's a moment of stillness, a silent message passing between us. Then, with a single thrust, he fills me completely.

I cry out, my body stretching to accommodate him. The sensation of him inside me is overwhelming, a mix of pleasure and a delicious ache.

He stills for a moment. "Are you okay?" he asks, his voice strained with the effort of holding back.

My breath comes in short puffs. "Yes. But, please, don't keep me waiting. Move."

He begins to thrust, his movements slow and deliberate at first, building to a faster, more serious rhythm. Even his expression is stern.

I wrap my legs around him, drawing him deeper, my hands clutching at his back, my nails scratching his flesh. The sounds of our bodies coming together fill the room—skin slapping against skin, wet sucking sounds, harsh breathing, grunts and moans filled with desire.

The tension builds in my body, a coil of need tightening with each thrust.

Spencer's eyes never stray far from mine, his gaze intense and focused.

"This feels... like we've been this dance for decades." The last word turns into a drawn-out groan, his body moving against mine with increasing speed. "I want more. I want it all. Shelby, I want everything I can have."

I can only moan in response, my body on the brink of release. The pleasure builds, a wave cresting, and when it breaks over me, it sends me spiraling into an orgasm so intense that it leaves me shaking and breathless. My toes and fingers curl. Stars flicker behind my eyelids.

Spencer follows me over the edge, his solid frame jerking and bucking as he shouts my name during his own release. He collapses on top of me, his breath ragged, his heart pounding hard against my breast.

We lay there for a moment, our bodies still joined, our breaths slowly returning to normal. And then, like last night, he rolls to the side, pulling me with him, wrapping his arms around me, tucking me close.

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“Wow,”he chuckles softly.

My response is as witty. “Yup”

We lay there for a while, our bodies pressed together, our hearts beating in sync. The room is quiet except for the hum of nightlife outside the windows and the air conditioning. And now the weight of the coming morning hangs heavy between us, a silent reminder that our time together is quickly running out.

Eventually, Spencer stirs, his hand trailing gently up my back. “Are you hungry? I can order something from room service?”

As though on cue, my stomach rumbles. “That sounds perfect.”

“What do you feel like having?”

“Idon’t know. What does a billionaire from New York have for a late-night snack with his Canadian weekend hookup?”I’m trying to make light of the situation, but it feels anything but a laughing matter. However, I fear I’ll cry for the rest of the night if I don’t try to laugh.

Spencer stares longingly at me for a moment before he reaches for the phone beside the bed.

“Hello, I’d like to order a large pepperoni pizza to my room please. And some ice cream with chocolate sauce if you have any. Thank you.”He hangs up and turns back to me, his eyes liquid pools. “We still have time,”he says, his voice gentle. “We’ll

indulge for a bit, replenish our energy, and then spend the rest of the night making love.”

My heart aches, as though torn in two, but I scrouge up the best smile I can. “I’d like that.”

When the food arrives, we eat slowly, wrapped in robes, sitting on the sofa, soft music in the background, feeding each other bites between kisses and laughter. The tension from earlier is gone, replaced by a tender intimacy that feels almost too good to be true.

After we finish eating, Spencer leads me back to the bed, his movements tender and deliberate. This time, there’s no rush, no urgency. Instead, there’s a deep, aching need to savor every moment, every touch, every whispered word.

He kisses me as though I’m a delicate flower, his hands tracing the curves of my body with a gentle reverence.

I melt into his touch, my body responding to his every caress. When he enters me this time, it’s with a slow, caring movement that speaks of deep emotion and longing for something lasting.

Our bodies move together in a rhythm that feels as natural as breathing. The pleasure builds gradually, a slow burn that consumes me from the inside out. We breathe in each other’s breath, taste each other’s lips, feel each other’s bodies, our moans soft and intimate murmurs.

When we find our release, it’s as one, our bodies trembling with the intensity of our connection. After we hold each other tightly, our skin slick, our heartbeats racing. Tears silently running down my cheeks.

As we lie in the dark room, wrapped in each other's arms, the reality of the coming morning begins to sink in. The thought of leaving Spencer, of returning to my life in Kingston, fills me with a deep sadness.

I shift slightly, my eyes meeting his in the dim light offered through the windows where we kept the drapes open so we could see the stars. "I wish we could have more time."

He brushes his thumb gently against my cheek, wiping away my tears. "Me too. More than anything."

We hold each other tightly as if we can stop time from moving forward. But morning comes all too soon, and with it, the inevitable goodbye.

As the first light of dawn begins to filter through the curtains, I slip quietly and stealthily out from beneath his arm. Spencer is sound asleep, his breaths soft and even.

My heart is heavy with indecision as I stand by the bed and stare down at him. He looks so peaceful in sleep, and I feel a pang of regret. I know I have to leave, but the thought of walking away from him, from what we shared, is almost unbearable.

Easing down on the edge of the bed, I reach out to gently touch his cheek. He stirs slightly, and I quickly pull my hand away, afraid to wake him. I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

"I can't do this," I whisper, my voice trembling. "I can't just walk away." But I have to. I have to protect myself, protect my heart.

I stand up, my resolve strengthening, and silently grab a notepad and pen from the desk. I start to write, the words flowing from my heart. But then I stop and crumple

up that sheet. With a fresh one, I start over, keeping it simple and to the point.

Spencer,

This weekend has been incredible, and I'll never forget it. You made me feel so special.

I'll send the completed article for your review in a few days.

Love,

Shelby

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:18 am

I pause, staring down at the words. I feel a tear slip down my cheek and quickly wipe it away. I want to write more, to pour out my feelings, my fears, my hopes. But I stop myself, knowing that it's better this way.

I place the note on the pillow beside him.

With one last look at his sleeping form, I turn and quietly leave the suite, closing the door softly behind me. The hallway is quiet, the hotel still asleep as I make my way to the elevator. When the doors close behind me, I lean back against the wall, my eyes closing as I fight to hold back the tears.

This weekend has been a whirlwind, a dream come true. What started out as a career opportunity turned into so much more. But now, it's time to face reality. We lead very different lives in very different cities. Countries. I'm not even close to the kind of woman a man like Spencer Hollis needs in his life. No matter what he said, he's a very rich man with responsibilities and obligations. I'm a small-town journalist trying to make a go of writing about celebrities. We don't match on so many levels.

This weekend was a moment. A lovely moment but a pocket of time out of our lives—nothing more.

If I hurry, I can catch an earlier flight home and avoid the risk of running into Spencer at the airport.

When I reach my room, I toss my things into my bag and change into travel clothes. What a beautiful room. And I hardly spent any time enjoying it. I glance up to the ceiling, wishing I could run back to Spencer's room and throw myself into his arms.

Shaking my head, I grab my things and leave the room. Thankfully, an Uber is only a couple of minutes away. When I reached the airport, I was so relieved to find I could change my flight that I almost cried. I don't think I could have sat waiting, wondering if Spencer would find me here, wondering if he'd be angry with me for leaving like I did. Worried he wouldn't give me a second glance when he saw me.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the journey home. No matter what happens next, I know that this new weekend in Quebec City with Spencer Hollis will be a memory I'll cherish forever.

Chapter Eleven

Shelby

I stare at my inbox like it might suddenly blink to life and give me what I've been waiting for—something, anything from Spencer.

It's been two weeks since I slipped out of his bed in Quebec City and hurried back to my hotel room. Two weeks since I left him a note on the pillow, telling him I'd send him the article for review. There'd been so many things I wanted to say, but I chickened out in the end. Though I did sign it, *Love Shelby*, I hope he understands our few days together meant more to me than I might say in a quick goodbye note.

Worried that he might wake up and chase me down, I didn't even take the time to shower. I tossed my things into my suitcase and escaped to the airport as quick as possible. Lucky for me, there was a seat on an earlier flight. I was in the air before he even woke and realized I'd skipped out on him.

I hope.

I did send him the article I wrote. Three days later. Professionally written, carefully

edited, and with my heart hidden between the lines.

And I haven't heard a single word from him since. I know he got it, I put a confirm receipt on the email.

Not a thank you. Not a red-ink edit. Not a rejection.

Just silence.

I must admit, I'm feeling a little wham-bam-thank you-ma'am. And it's my own fault. I allowed myself to ignore all my normal rules for first dates. I accepted a dinner date with little knowledge of the man other than watching him work and asking him a few questions. Hell, he asked me to join him for the weekend because he wanted to rectify his ladies-man reputation. Sure, we were both in the same place for work, and it made sense to have a meal together.

But he called it a date.

And I slept with him.

Not only that, but I also fell head over heels for a man I barely knew. I spent two unforgettable days and nights with him, knowing that he normally dated women who were more sophisticated, more worldly, traveled, and far more financially secure than me.

The man is far from my league; we're in different sports. Yet I allowed myself to be drawn into a fling with a man whose whole purpose for our meeting was to spin an article in his favor. I did my best to crack the façade and paint a picture of a businessman focused on rebranding the family business and not sleeping with all the gorgeous models he found himself surrounded by each month.

I cover my face with my hands. If it was such a mistake, why does it hurt so much? I've spent fourteen days eating ice cream or peanut butter by the spoonful, straight from the container. I've googled The Hollis Group and deep-dived into each aspect of the family business. I've searched for every image of him I could find, including the ones with pretty women on his arm, and scrutinized his facial expression and body language for any hints of his feelings toward the women.

It felt a little stalkerish.

I also experienced immense relief when every one of those photos showed a woman beaming up at him, but he looked bored.

I might not have heard from Spencer Hollis, but Marika's been calling me relentlessly, and I've been avoiding her. She even tried to make it look like Shaun called to check on me. I'm smarter than that. She just used his phone.

My smart-as-a-whip sister-in-law has no clue about what happened during my long weekend in Quebec, but I'm betting her sixth sense is going haywire.

When I finally gathered the courage, I dug up his work email from the company website and sent two emails to Spencer. Both were friendly, pretending as though nothing happened. That I didn't skip out and that I didn't fall in love.

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Both have gone unanswered.

I found a phone number and tried calling. It went straight to voicemail. I didn't leave a message. What would I even say? Sorry, I ran off like a coward before you woke up? I panicked because I didn't trust how much I was starting to feel. My bad. Please forgive me.

That's not the kind of thing you leave in a voicemail. And I didn't want to risk his assistant monitoring the call.

I take a sip of my now-cold coffee and wince. Yuk. The rain outside my office window hasn't let up all day, turning the streets of Kingston into a blur of gray. It matches my mood. I've reread the notes I took during those couple of days so many times I practically have them memorized. I started out on this journey thinking I'd simply pen an honest article about a rich man who wanted people to look at him not as a billionaire flirt but as a businessman who happened to be a billionaire. A man whose focus wasn't on the next woman he'd bed but on restoring his family's legacy.

And I accomplished what I set out to do. Spencer Hollis is not the seducer his board of cronies believes. He's not his father. He genuinely cares about the companies and the work he does. He wants to make his family proud.

But if my article has helped to restore his image, why haven't I heard from him? Even simply to thank me?

I'm convinced he's angry. Hurt. Done.

I walked out on him without giving him a chance. So maybe that's what I deserve.

Still, I open my desk drawer and pull out my phone. One last try.

I scroll to the number for his office in New York and hit call before I can talk myself out of it.

It rings once. Twice.

"Spencer Hollis's office, Linda Morgan speaking."

I swallow. "Hi, Ms. Morgan. It's Shelby, Shelby Bailey. I'm looking for Spencer."

There's a short pause on the other end. "Hi, Shelby. I'm afraid Mr. Hollis isn't in the office at the moment. Would you like to leave a message?"

I hesitate because I don't even know what I'm doing anymore. "No, I just... I was hoping to speak with him. It's not urgent."

"Well, I know he's been meaning to reach out. We had the article published in our company newsletter and in a local paper. The feedback has been exactly what he hoped for. I thought he planned to talk?—"

A knock, sharp and unexpected, interrupts the conversation. I don't get many visitors on Friday afternoon.

"Shelby, are you still there?"

"Oh, yes, sorry. Somebody's knocking on my door. Can you please just tell Spencer I called."

“Of course, but?—”

“Thank you.” My visitor knocks again, a little louder this time. Somebody’s impatient.

When I turn, with the phone still pressed to my ear, and see who is standing in the doorway of my office, I nearly drop it.

It’s him.

Spencer.

Soaking wet from the rain, wearing that charcoal gray coat I remember from Quebec, hair damp and curling slightly at the edges, eyes locked on mine like he’s not sure I’m real.

“Shelby?” Linda’s voice filters faintly through the phone.

I lower it slowly, ending the call without a word, rising from my chair. My heart pounds in my chest, and I can’t tear my eyes away from Spencer. He’s holding something in his hand. Is that a printed copy of my article, folded and creased like it’s been read and reread a dozen times?

Spencer’s voice is rough with emotion. “You don’t need to leave a message.”

Hope blossoms in my chest. “You’re here.”

He steps into the office and closes the distance between us in two strides. “I wasn’t sure you’d want to see me.” He hesitates, looking unsure. “I thought for sure I screwed everything up. Moved too fast, pressured you. I’m sorry if I did. I didn’t mean to.”

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I shake my head, my eyes filling with tears. “I panicked. I thought I screwed everything up, too. I thought you’d be angry because of the way I left, and that you’d never want to see me again.”

Spencer closes his eyes and exhales, a sound somewhere between relief and frustration. “I was angry, Shelby. But not at you, honey. At myself, for not being honest with you sooner, for not telling you how I truly felt.”

He steps closer, his hand reaching out to cup my cheek. “I came to ask for the truth, Shelby. In person. All cards on the table. Because I can’t stop thinking about you. About us. And I’m not going to find the answers I need in your article.” He holds it up. “Which is brilliant, by the way. Honest. Sharp. It sets the record straight. But it’s not the whole truth.”

“No,” I whisper, my heart pounding and my body trembling with excitement. “It’s not.”

“I need to know if what happened in Quebec meant as much to you as it did to me.”

“It did,” I say, the words barely a whisper of a breath. “I was scared because I felt so much too quickly. I told myself it was just the weekend, just a story, but that wasn’t true. Not even close. People don’t really fall in love that quickly. But I did.”

Spencer smiles, his thumb brushing gently against my cheek. “I don’t want just a weekend, Shelby. I don’t want just a short story. I want the late nights and the early mornings and the inconvenient travel and the way you drink your coffee like it’s a religion.”

A laugh breaks out of me, wet, shaky, and full of something dangerously close to joy.

“I want you, Shelby Bailey,” Spencer says, his voice low, measured and jam-packed with emotion. “Even if you run. Even if we have to figure it out across cities and borders. I want you with every fiber of my being. I need you in my life.”

I squeeze his hand, grounding myself in the reality of him standing in front of me, tall, handsome, and he smells good too. “I want you too. And I’m done running.”

Spencer drops the piece of paper, and it drifts to the floor. He cups my face, eyes searching mine. “Good. Because I don’t plan to let you go again.”

And then he kisses me, soft and slow and sure, right in the middle of my office where anyone could walk by, but I don’t care.

I kiss him back with everything I’ve been holding in, with the longing and the guilt and the aching hope that maybe, just maybe, a weekend fling wasn’t all I’d ever have.

When we part, his forehead rests against mine.

“What happens now?” I ask, breathless.

“Now?” Spencer murmurs, smiling. “Now we figure it out. Together.”

And just like that, the weight I’ve been carrying lifts.

“The board loved the article,” he says, a smile spreading across his face. I can see the relief in his eyes, and it makes my heart swell with pride. “They’re impressed with how it portrays the company and me. They’re finally starting to see that I’m not my father, and that I’m serious about the business.”

A wave of relief washes over me. “That’s amazing, Spencer. I’m so happy for you.”

His eyes shine with gratitude. “And Linda says Hayden is back in town. He’s ready to step up, to take on more responsibility in the company. It looks like things are finally coming together.”

“That’s wonderful news. It sounds like everything is falling into place.”

Spencer takes my hand, his fingers intertwining with mine. “It is. And it’s all thanks to you. You’ve changed everything for me. You’ve given me a chance to show the world who I really am.”

My eyes fill with tears, my heart overflowing with love and happiness. “And you’ve changed everything for me. You’ve shown me that love doesn’t happen on a prescribed timetable. Two years or two days, it doesn’t matter. If it’s right, it’s worth taking a chance on.”

Spencer leans in, his lips brushing softly against mine. “I love you, Shelby. And I’m never letting you go again.”

“I love you too, Spencer. And I’m not going anywhere.”

Epilogue

Shelby

The snow falls in delicate, glittering spirals outside the wide-paned windows of our suite at the Auberge Saint-Antoine, dusting the rooftops of Old Quebec in a soft, shimmering white. The city feels like it’s holding its breath, waiting for the turn of the year, waiting for midnight to strike and sweep us into the next chapter of our lives.

I rest my hand against the cold glass and smile as I watch the flicker of lights reflecting off the icy cobblestones below. Quebec City at Christmas is a dream with its twinkling fairy lights on every street corner, the subtle scent of sugar and spice lingering in the air, and the sound of carolers drifting up from the square below.

It's only been half a year, but it feels like I've known Spencer for most of my life. Back in the summer, when I agreed to do an article on him, I never even imagined meeting my soul mate and falling in love over a long weekend. The whole whirlwind affair has been something I thought could only happen in the movies or books. We came back in the fall to oversee the official photoshoot for the magazine, and then he surprised me with a trip to the same place for New Year's.

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The man's not a playboy. He's a romantic.

Behind me, I hear the soft click of the door as it closes and the quiet rustle of Spencer shedding his coat. His footsteps pad across the warm floor, and moments later, his arms wrap around my waist from behind, pulling me gently back against his strong, muscular chest.

"You cold?" he murmurs against my neck, his breath hot and a little ticklish.

I shake my head. "Not anymore."

He hums, his lips brushing the spot just below my ear, and I melt into the familiar comfort of his arms.

"It's almost midnight," he says, glancing at the antique clock mounted on the wall. "We should head to the terrace soon or we'll miss the fireworks."

I tilt my head back and look up to meet his gaze. "We could always watch from here. The view's not bad."

There's something behind his smile tonight. A flicker of nerves, maybe? Anticipation. It's almost invisible, so elusive I might have missed it if I didn't know him as well as I do.

"You've been acting strangely quiet all evening," I say, gently turning in his arms. "Is everything okay?"

He leans in and kisses me, soft and sweet, nibbling a little on my bottom lip and flipping my arousal button on. “Everything’s perfect.” He lets out a slow breath but avoids looking me directly in the eyes when he reaches for my hand. “Come. I want to show you something before midnight.”

Spencer leads me through the dimly lit hotel hallway, our footsteps quiet against the plush carpet. Most guests are downstairs or at other events in the city. Only staff are bustling around, ensuring everything is in order for the celebration that will take place at the turn of the hour. He squeezes my hand once, a silent reassurance, and I glance up at him, heart fluttering for reasons I don’t fully understand.

The terrace is quiet when we step outside, save for the distant hum of voices and music drifting up from the street. “Where is everyone?” The sky is ink-dark, the stars shimmering through a veil of falling snow. A string of golden lights outlines the wrought-iron railing, creating a private, romantic setting for the small table set up near the edge with two flutes of champagne already waiting and a blanket draped over the back of a nearby chair.

“Spencer?”

“I booked the terrace for just the two of us tonight.”

“But what about the other guests?”

“Let’s call it a perk of having lots of money. Besides, there are other vantage points. I may have also paid to have something set up on the south side of the building. They won’t miss anything.”

He really thought of everything.

I smile, secretly delighted that we get to spend our first New Year’s Eve as a couple

in such a stunning setting. I wrap my arms around myself, soaking in the view. “It’s beautiful.”

Spencer doesn’t answer right away. Instead, he slips behind me again, places his hands on my hips, and rests his chin on my shoulder. “Do you remember our first weekend here?”

“I’ll remember it forever.” The excitement of our fling, the passion we shared, the familiar heartache of our last night together. “I remember thinking I didn’t want it to end.” And I snuck away in the early morning hours because I couldn’t face saying goodbye to the first man I truly loved.

“It didn’t.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “It just took us a little longer to get to the next part.”

It took two extraordinarily long weeks.

I turn in his arms, my eyes searching his. “Spencer...”

He brushes a thumb across my cheek, his gaze becoming serious. “Being with you, Shelby, has changed everything for me. The way I work, the way I live, the way I see my future. I used to think I have everything I want, but the truth is, none of it means a damn thing without someone special to share it with.”

My heart is pounding. I think I know what’s coming, but still, I can’t move. Can’t breathe.

He lets go of my waist and takes a step back. Then, slowly, deliberately, he lowers himself to one knee on the terrace covered with a light dusting of snow.

I gasp, covering my mouth with both hands as tears spring to my eyes.

The city goes quiet. Or maybe it's just me.

Spencer looks up, his eyes shining in the darkness. "I fell in love with you in this city. I didn't know it at the time, but somewhere deep inside, I knew you were going to change my life. You make me a better man, Shelby. You make me whole. And there's no other person I want to face every challenge, every adventure, every quiet moment with."

He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a small black box. Inside, nestled in velvet, is a ring. It's classily stunning. A single round diamond in a delicate platinum setting. Elegant. Timeless. Just like him.

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“Shelby Bailey,” he says softly, “will you please do me the honor of marrying me?”

The world rushes back in a single heartbeat. Suddenly, I hear music, feel the falling snow, and see fireworks burst over the city in a glorious display of gold and silver.

“I know it might feel like it’s too soon. But our whole romance has been rushed.” He pauses and shakes his head, a slight frown on his brows. “No, not rushed, perfect, as it was meant to be. We’re not meant to wait. Please say yes. I don’t know what I’ll do with myself if you tell me no.”

“Yes,” I whisper, then louder so he can hear me above the explosions around us. But my voice breaks, and my eyes are blurry. “Yes. Of course I will marry you.”

He stands, slipping the ring onto my finger with hands that are just a little unsteady. The moment it’s on there, I throw my arms around his neck, laughing through my tears, and he lifts me off my feet, spinning me in a circle as the sky lights up behind us in celebration.

Then the world slows down again as my feet hit the cobblestone, and he kisses me. The cold, the fireworks, the cheers, the notes of Auld Lang Syne fade away. It’s just Spencer and me, wrapped in love, soft light, and the promise of forever.

And somewhere deep inside, I know we’ve come full circle. The city that brought us together is now the place where we begin our story.

* * *