

Timing Is Everything
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“You’re kidding! Right, Robert?” Laura Collins looked up from the assignment sheet the city editor had just thrown on her desk.

“Nope. He’s all yours, Laura,” the man said with an evil grin. “There are people on this staff who would kill for the chance I’m giving you.”

“Then let them kill me and take it! You know I hate doing these celebrity stories.” Laura pushed her fingers through her long, copper-colored hair. “Why can’t Heidi do it? She loves this stuff.”

“Heidi has the flu. So does half of the rest of the staff, Laura. In fact, you’re going to have to run without a photographer, too. We’ll just use the publicity shot that came with the press packet. Taylor Morgan is yours, like it or not. Your appointment is at eleven. Don’t be late.”

“Great. Just great,” Laura muttered under her breath as she watched her boss walk away. She glanced at her watch, then down at the jeans and cotton shirt she was wearing. She hadn’t dressed for an interview, especially not one with a major celebrity. If she hurried, she could look over the background file and still make it home in time to change before she had to be downtown for the interview. As she picked up her purse and notebook, she glared at the office where Robert was now closeted with Henry Alaniz, the paper’s editor.

As she headed out the door she heard someone call out, “Laura!” She turned to see her best friend, Beth, hurrying to catch up with her. “Laura! Did you forget we were doing lunch?”

“I’m sorry, Beth, I did. Robert just assigned me an interview, and I need to get home to change.”

“Change? Must be a pretty important interview.”

“I have to interview that singer who’s performing here tomorrow. Taylor Morgan, God’s gift to the musical theatre and women everywhere.” She rolled her eyes as she saw the look on Beth’s face. “Not you, too!”

“Yes, me, too! Have you heard him sing? Or taken a look at that gorgeous face?” Beth knew Laura’s taste in music ran more to classic rock and that it was unlikely she had ever paid much attention to Taylor Morgan. “Do you need an assistant? ‘Cause I volunteer!”

“I’d give you the whole assignment if I could! I was planning on using today to finish up my research on that story about the governor’s stand on drug use. I don’t have time to waste on fluff!”

“Collins!” She looked up as her boss shouted her name across the busy newsroom. “Are you planning on making it to that interview today?”

She waved at him as she headed for the door. “We’ll have to do lunch tomorrow, Beth. Sorry!”

“I’m going to want details!” Beth called after her. But Laura was already out the door and running down the stairs, too impatient to wait for the elevator.

* * *

Laura pulled her ancient Opel GT into a parking spot at the Hyatt Regency’s garage with fifteen minutes to spare. She used ten of them to review the file Robert had handed her. It was the usual bio stuff. Small town boy. Only child. Parents dead. Overnight sensation. Broadway’s golden boy. She was impressed to see that he’d channeled the considerable energy and resources of his fan club into raising funds for the children’s charity he sponsored. Albuquerque, like many of the stops on his concert tour, had been chosen because a Shelter for Children house was here. A fundraiser reception was scheduled after

tomorrow night's concert.

She glanced at the black and white glossy that was included in the packet. He was good looking, kind of the boy-next-door thing. (Not that the boy next door to her had ever looked so good!) Nice smile. Thick, wavy hair. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

* * *

Laura mentally ran over her background notes about Morgan as the elevator ascended. A discrete chime signaled her arrival. As the doors opened, she was a little surprised to be met by two security guards who politely asked for her credentials. Sure, he was famous, but this was Albuquerque! After checking her name against a list, one of them went to the door of the suite across from the elevator, evidently received approval to bring her in, then came back and escorted her to the door.

A very pretty young woman greeted her. "Ms. Collins, I'm Taylor's assistant, Christine Spencer. He'll be along in a moment. Could I get you some coffee or tea while you're waiting?"

"Thanks, but no. I'm fine. Where would you like me to set up?"

Christine showed her to a sunny window with two chairs and a small table placed in front of it. There was a superb view of the city and the Sandia Mountains to the east. "This will be fine, thanks. Have you been Mr. Morgan's assistant for long?"

Christine smiled. "A couple of years now."

"It must be interesting traveling all over the place," Laura commented as she got out a pad and pencil and placed them on the table.

"Interesting and a little wearing," she replied. "We're on the end of this leg of the tour, and I'll be glad to get home."

"I envy you. I've never traveled much, but I hope to someday." Laura took out a small tape recorder. "Do you know if Mr. Morgan will be agreeable to my using this?"

"I think we can work something out," said a deep voice behind her. Laura turned to find the most beautiful man she'd ever seen smiling at her. His press kit photo hadn't prepared her for his tremendous charisma and, in black and white, it had given no hint of the unique turquoise of his eyes; eyes that were now looking at her with a touch of amusement.

"You must be Laura Collins." He held out his hand and, for a split second, she nearly forgot to shake it. "From the *Herald*?" he prompted, as her hand finally met his.

Laura had never had this kind of reaction to anyone before. She had to look away from him before she could focus on what she should be saying. Suddenly aware that she was still holding his hand, she took a deep breath as she released it, then said, "Yes, the *Albuquerque Herald*. It's very nice to meet you, Mr. Morgan." There was a security in saying all the right things that allowed her to regain her self-control. "Thank you for taking the time for this interview. I know our readers will be interested in your latest projects."

"First, Ms. Collins, I hate being called Mr. Morgan. That was my father. He was the school principal, and being called into Mr. Morgan's office was not a good thing. So, it's Taylor, please."

Laura laughed. "Then please call me Laura."

"I left some letters in the other room, Chris. I think they're ready for you." Christine put a pitcher of water and two glasses on the table, then took her cue and left the room. Taylor indicated the chairs and waited until Laura was seated before he took his.

"Did Albuquerque arrange this beautiful weather just for my visit?" Taylor liked to take the lead in these interviews. If he could just develop some rapport with the interviewer, the whole experience was a lot less tedious.

Laura glanced out the window before answering. "I wish I could say that we did. Might keep some of

those Easterners from moving here if we could say it was horrible all the time. See those patches of yellow on the mountain? Those are the aspens that have changed color, but you won't see many other signs of the changing season. Fall in New Mexico isn't like it is anywhere else. It comes on a little slower, with less fanfare. Usually it's summer one day and winter the next. Sometimes it feels like we skip fall and spring altogether."

Taylor found her honesty a refreshing change from the people he usually dealt with. "I imagine that your newspaper doesn't agree with your views."

"No, and my editor would probably kill me if he knew what I said. I was born here and I wish, in some ways, that we weren't growing so quickly. But, then, as a small town, we wouldn't be attracting someone like you." Laura deftly turned the conversation back to interview mode. "Tell me a little about how you got started in show business."

"I had a mother who was interested in theatre and music. My father, however, was tone-deaf and hated sitting still for very long. He was happy to hand off the escort duties to me as soon as I was old enough to be a companion instead of a responsibility. She and I went to every show or concert that came anywhere near us, and there were quite a few that came to Sacramento. It was only an hour away from Woodland, where I grew up."

"You were pretty young when you went to New York, weren't you?"

"Nineteen and sure I could conquer the world. I'd already been accepted to an outstanding drama program with a full scholarship, but I decided to go ahead and give it a go in New York."

"Nineteen? I can't imagine your parents were thrilled with the decision."

He laughed. "Not hardly! My parents and I had a really good relationship, and that was the first time I'd ever actually defied them. They finally gave in when they saw how determined I was. They gave me one year to make it. If I didn't, I would come back and go to school on the scholarship I had been able to get deferred."

"But you never had to go back?"

"It came close to happening. I'd had a couple of parts in shows that flopped, and I was living off my salary as a part-time bookstore clerk. I only had a month left on our agreement when I got my first big part. After that, everything just clicked into place, and I never looked back."

"So it took you a year to become an overnight sensation?"

"I was lucky. There are people out there much more talented than I am who are still waiting tables and working nights to keep their days open for auditions."

"And now it's concerts?"

"Before I left New York, I was onstage for eight years, in a combination of several shows. I'd had the chance to record a couple of CDs that sold fairly well. Then, I was approached a year ago to do this concert tour, tours, really, since we'll pick up again after the first of the year."

"When did you get involved with Shelter for Children?"

"I had a pretty idyllic childhood, not that I realized it at the time," he said with an engaging grin that almost cost Laura her hard-won poise. "My last year on Broadway, I was asked to perform in a benefit concert for Shelter. I met some of the kids, heard some of the horror stories. I couldn't forget them. I have an eleven-year-old goddaughter who could have easily ended up like one of them. So, I began to help in whatever way I could. Now I'm 'president' of the organization. Mostly it just means I lend my name for fundraising, but I spend time with the kids when I can." As Laura glanced down at her notes, Taylor was grateful for the break. There was something about Laura Collins that he found disturbing. She had a way of really listening to his answers, and he realized he'd been telling her more than he'd ever let out in an interview before. He'd have to be careful that he didn't reveal too much. When she raised her head and her deep green eyes met his again, he forgot all about being on his guard.

Laura smiled at him. "How does it feel to be the 'Sexiest Man Alive'?" she asked as she pulled out a copy

of *People Magazine* that had been published a few weeks ago.

“Embarrassing, if you want to know the truth.”

“Does this have anything to do with those guards outside your door?”

Taylor was silent for a moment before he answered. “I guess it does in some ways. I’ve got a pretty large fan base, and not all of them are stable. There have been a couple of incidents that have made security a necessity.”

Laura said, “What about family, friends? What do you do in your downtime, Taylor?”

“My best friend and her daughter—my goddaughter—live near me. I spend a lot of time with them when I’m home. I do a lot of in-line skating and reading, too.”

A woman? His best friend was a woman? An unexpected bolt of pure jealousy ran through her before she continued.

“What about on the road? You do a tremendous amount of traveling. Do you ever get to really see any of the places you visit?”

“Not often. There’s rarely time, always somewhere else to be. I wish I could. For example, here in Albuquerque. It would be great to really take some time and explore it, share it with someone.” His eyes softened as he looked out the window, like a child forced to do piano practice when others were outside playing. Laura heard a note of melancholy in his voice, and she found herself unexpectedly filled with compassion for this man whose life was not really his own. She’d never felt this way about any other interviewee, and she found it disconcerting. She changed the subject back to the concert and the plans for the post-concert charity benefit.

Finally, closing her notebook and turning off the recorder, she said, “Thanks for your time, Taylor. It’s been a great interview. I hope you’ll be pleased with what we finally publish.”

He stood and watched as she gathered up her recorder and notebook. More than once during the interview, he had been distracted by her beauty. But, it was more than that. He felt a kinship with her, a connection he couldn’t really pin down. All he *was* sure of was that he wanted to spend more time with her. Quickly, before he could reason himself out of it, he said, “Laura? Would you like to come to rehearsal tonight? And have dinner with me afterward?”

Laura was surprised and more than a little wary. This wasn’t the first time she had been hit on by an interview subject, but it was the first time she’d ever been tempted to say ‘yes’. Something in his eyes told her that this wasn’t the usual come-on and she said, “Taylor, I’d love to. Should I meet you back here before you go to the theatre?”

“That would be great. Around six?”

“I’ll be here.” Laura picked up her things and headed for the door.

As he opened the door for her, he told the security guards, “Ms. Collins will be back tonight to go to the theatre with me.”

“I’ll see you then, Taylor,” she said, and he watched as she entered the elevator and, with a wave of her hand, was gone.

He turned and re-entered the suite, closing the door behind him. Walking to the window, he stared out toward the mountains, his hands unconsciously caressing the back of the chair where she had been.