

an apple creek sweet romance

# Reporting for Love



audrey carnes

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a small-town, second-chance, enemies-to-lovers, sweet/clean romance

Audrey Carnes

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*For Monica – thank you for naming all of my characters! Okay, maybe not ALL of them. Thanks for being an incredible encouragement as I'm starting my author journey and for giving me great feedback! Thank you!!*

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*Cami*

*Sam Perkins is officially the worst.* I watch him from across the room as he works the crowd, chatting up unsuspecting victims who may not know they're talking to a reporter. It's like watching a spider making its way across its web, honing in on some innocent insect to kill.

*Honestly, no one that awful should be allowed to be that handsome.* With his curly black hair, blue eyes, dark-rimmed glasses, and moleskin notebook, he's really working the whole Clark Kent vibe. Too bad underneath his debonair attire, he's less Superman and more Lex Luther.

He turns his head to catch me watching him, and rather than pretending I wasn't, I narrow my eyes and give him my best death glare. He just winks at me, like the total donkey's rear end that he is. *Typical.*

The first time I had met him, I hadn't known of his inner donkey-like characteristics and *may* have been fooled enough by his outer charms to go on a date with him. In my defense, the dating pool in Apple Creek—population circa 30,000—is on the shallow end.

Shortly after our date, and thank heavens before I could repeat *that* mistake, he had shown his true colors by publishing an awful article on Caroline Wickers, our mayor. That was after he had promised police captain Jason Masterson that he wouldn't publish the article, *and* tried to extort a future favor from him. *What a snake.*

As Caroline's former paralegal and current chief of staff, I am one hundred percent Team Caroline. Sam had had the gall to try to call me after that, which I hadn't even bothered to respond to. A good thing since he followed up his first act by publishing a nasty article questioning the morals of my very best friend, Linda Cromwell, who had been caught kissing a coworker at the police department. But in *her* defense, Russ Salvatore is hotter than a five alarm fire, and his story (that he's sticking to) is that he tripped.

The point being, Sam Perkins has published articles attacking the two women closest to me. He is total pond scum and I hate him. And that is why it is extremely annoying that his wink sets off a tingle in my lady parts.

I take a big swallow of wine as I inwardly criticize myself for being weak and lonely. I make a mental note to reactivate my online dating profile. I've obviously been single far too long.

"Having fun?" I turn to see Caroline, standing next to me. She's dressed in a killer dress that somehow makes her look both professional *and* sexy at the same time. As her chief of staff, I happen to know she's been on the go since seven this morning, and yet you could never tell from her appearance now. *Lucky*. I don't have to look in a mirror to know that there are likely bags under my eyes and my makeup has long since made its exit.

We're out in middle-of-nowhere Indiana for a political fundraiser hosted by Theodore Caldwell, a reclusive billionaire. *Now there is a scrum-diddly-umptious man, and rich to boot*. My eyes find the older man, who personifies the term 'silver fox,' and who has the good sense to be a big supporter of Caroline's. Judging by his mansion and the cut of his suit, he also has amazing taste.

"I assume it would be a terrible decision for your chief of staff to hit on your biggest donor?" I ask, only half joking.

Caroline's eyes follow mine. "Probably, but who could blame you?"

I laugh. "Don't let Jason hear you say that." The police captain didn't seem like a jealous man, but given the fact he acted like the sun rose and set with Caroline, it was better not to put it to the test.

"Never," she says with a conspiratorial wink. "On that note, I'm about ready to head out. From what I can hear outside, the weather has just gotten worse and with it being dark, it will take twice as long to get home. Are you coming?"

I look at my empty wine glass, my third in the short period we've been here. Another crime to lay at the feet of Sam Perkins. If he hadn't been here, strutting around with his too-good looks, I wouldn't have drunk as much.

Regardless, the thought of trying to manage winding country roads in the pitch black and driving rain makes me hesitate. "I'll stick around a little longer to make sure I'm safe to drive and then follow you."

"Okay. Have a good night." She leans in to whisper, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

I grin at her. One of the reasons we work together so well is that we're so alike, both strong, independent women who like to take risks. It was as much a surprise to me as anyone when she fell in love with the police captain, who seems more the type to like the proverbial little wife at home. But I guess the heart wants what the heart wants.

My eyes focus, and I realize I'm staring again at Sam Perkins. *Fudge*. Even worse, he seems to be making his way over here, his eyes locked on me. *Fudgey McFudgerson*. I paste a bored expression on my face, even as butterflies race their way up my middle. *Traitors*.

"Cami," Sam says, by way of greeting. His deep voice sends a shock wave through my system.

"Perkins," I say in response, trying my best to ignore him. Even so, the faint scent of his cologne makes its way to my nose. *Darn it, he always did smell good*.

He laughs, which is further irritating. "Are we not on a first name basis anymore?"

I look at him, then, and boy, is that a mistake. His blue eyes are dazzling behind his glasses, and a perfect dark curl falls over his forehead. *Keep it together*, I chide myself. "Would you prefer I call you 'scum'? Rat? Weasel? How about two-faced snake?"

"Oh, come on," Sam says, looking honestly astonished. "For what?"

I roll my eyes. "Like you don't know."



“The article on Caroline?” he guesses. “That’s my job, remember? Reporting on political backroom deals like the game she and Captain Masterson were playing with each other. It wasn’t personal.”

I cross my arms. “How about the one on Linda and Russ?”

“Also my job,” he says, frowning. “Reporting on potential misconduct by city employees.”

I groan. “Are you kidding me? It was a kiss. One kiss. In the supply room. And, if you believe Russ, a total accident.”

He pushes his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. “And I included that perspective in the article.”

I laugh incredulously, not even caring that I’m attracting attention. “You made it sound like they had been caught *in flagrante delicto* in the middle of the audit of the police department!”

“It’s up to the reader to form their own conclusion,” Sam says, his voice beginning to heat up. “And it *was* in the middle of the audit of the police department. They were caught by the audit team!”

“It was an accident!” I say, coming dangerously close to a yell.

“Everything okay here?” Theodore Caldwell asks. He quickly approaches us, likely to ward off a blow-up in the middle of his fancy party.

Ten minutes ago, I would have loved the opportunity to ogle the billionaire up close. But now Sam Perkins has ruined even that for me. *Typical.*

“It will be,” I say. “I’m leaving. Thank you for a lovely evening and for your support of Mayor Wickers.”

“Of course,” Theodore says, flashing a grin. “She’s a visionary and a desperately needed voice in small town politics.”

“And your support has nothing to do with the tax break I hear Mayor Wickers is giving your company for a business

development in Apple Creek?” Sam accuses. He leans in, as though he’s holding a microphone.

Of course, for all I know, he probably does have a microphone somewhere on his person. *Total weasel*. “Have a good night, Mr. Caldwell.” I turn to go.

“What, no farewell for me?” Sam asks behind me, his tone mocking.

The words I have for him aren’t meant for polite company. Instead, I surreptitiously give him the finger as I walk away, putting an extra swing in my step. *If I never have to talk to Sam Perkins again, it will be too soon.*

*Sam*

My eyes are glued to the swing of Cami's hips as she walks away. A few choice complimentary words spring to my lips, but I keep them inside. The woman certainly knows how to make an exit.

I came back to Apple Creek not that long ago—the result of a small misunderstanding between an editor and myself about the principles of investigative journalism integrity—and I fully intend it to be only a short stint before I bounce back to the major leagues of big city reporting. Still, I can't be too upset about the career shift, as Apple Creek introduced me to the one woman who has attracted me more than any other.

From the moment that I spotted Cami—all caramel skin, long black hair, and fiery attitude—it's like my body has a homing beacon, only attuned to her. I can't be in the same room with the woman without wanting to be close to her. It's irritating.

At first I resisted the attraction as it quickly became clear that Caroline Wickers was planning a run for mayor. As a reporter on the political beat, I couldn't be seen to be fraternizing with a member of the candidate's staff, nor did I ever want Cami or anyone to think I was using her for information.

But all my good intentions couldn't outweigh my attraction to her. I finally broke down and asked her out for a drink. For one perfect night, it felt like all my dreams had come true. Cami was everything I ever wanted in a woman: smart and funny, just as interested as me in politics and with a quick wit that dazzled. The chemistry between us crackled like lightning in a Midwestern thunderstorm.

That same night, I got a tip about Captain Masterson's and Caroline Wickers' scheme to fake a relationship to garner her votes. It was too juicy a story to ignore and I confronted Masterson, who eventually admitted to the plan.

For a brief moment, I let my interest in Cami sway me. I contemplated not running the story against her boss, walking away from perhaps the biggest scandal in Apple Creek history. I told Masterson I wouldn't publish the story and made up an excuse so he wouldn't suspect the real reason.

But after I left him at the bar, it didn't sit right with me. I became a reporter to expose the Truth about politics and the kind of backroom deals that robbed the average citizen. If I let my interest in Cami undermine my beliefs, well, I'd be no different than Masterson. So I did the right thing and took it to my editor, Levi, who immediately told me to publish it. And I did.

I tried calling Cami to explain, but she didn't answer. Nor did she respond to any of my other calls or voicemails. When I saw her at the next political event, the mayoral candidates' debate, she acted like I was a serial killer.

Fine. Message received. If she couldn't understand that I was just doing my job and it was nothing personal, then she wasn't the right woman for me, anyway. Even if just the sight of her made every cell in my body light up.

The article on Russ and Linda was also objectively fair. The audit of the police department was a big deal. The fact that a rookie and a supervising trainer were caught in a liplock by the audit team simply could not go unreported, as well as the very legitimate questions about police resources, staffing cuts, and overall management under Captain Masterson.

Did I know Linda, the subject of the article, was Cami's best friend? Maybe. Did I think about Cami for a second before hitting publish? Maybe. But I was still just doing my job. I just wish Cami could see that and give me another shot.

"She doesn't seem to like you much," Theodore Caldwell comments with an amused lift of his eyebrow, taking in Cami's one-finger salute to me.

*I don't like the way his eyes also cling to Cami's backside.* "She likes me plenty fine, thanks. She just doesn't know it yet."

The billionaire laughs. “You seem pretty sure about that.”

“I am.” Okay, maybe I sound more confident than I feel, but the last thing I need is a rich real estate developer sniffing around my girl. Even if she’s not my girl. Yet.

On that thought, I put my glass down. “Any last comment on the dealings between Caldwell Enterprises and Mayor Wickers’ office?”

“No. I’m still wondering how you got in here, in fact,” Caldwell says. “I don’t remember you being on the list.”

*Oops.* “Paid for a ticket like everybody else.” I start to edge toward the door.

His eyes narrow. “The event is invite only. Or else I’m firing my assistant.”

And that’s my cue to leave. “Just as well I’m going, then.”

The older man watches me go and I get the sense that if it wouldn’t have ended his party on a sour note, he might have personally escorted me out. I make a mental note to dig further into the developer’s past.

But my mind isn’t on the billionaire, but a certain sharp-tongued lady who I can see already heading out the door into the raging storm. “Cami!” She pauses until she turns to see it’s me, huffs, and steps outside. I pull out my umbrella and open it, shielding her from the torrential rain.

“I don’t need your help,” she says, even as she leans closer to me under the umbrella.

“I didn’t say you did.” I’m just happy for the few stolen moments I get to have with her as we walk to the cars. I resist the urge to pull her tight against my body. “But since we happened to be leaving at the same time and I happened to have this umbrella, I didn’t mind sharing it. Because I’m a gentleman.”

Cami snorts.

I give her a sidelong glance, trying to read her expression as best as I can in the storming weather. “What, you don’t believe I’m a gentleman?”

“I *know* you’re not,” she snaps.

I would put up with a lot from her, but this is a step too far. I stop walking and she pauses with me—whether to keep talking to me or to stay under the umbrella’s cover, I don’t know, but I need an answer. “How was I not a perfect gentleman with you?”

“You know what you did,” Cami says.

A flash of lightning electrifies the air, giving me a brief glimpse of her face. She jumps at the flash and my hand instinctively reaches out to steady her. Touching her sends a spark of energy coursing through me. For a moment, I truly regret that first article, and the chance that it cost me with her. “We can agree to disagree. Are you ever going to forgive me for it?”

“Forgive you?” she asks. “You don’t even act like you did anything wrong.” But her tone doesn’t have the same hard edge as before.

“Give me a chance to explain. Have a drink with me. Please.” It’s all I can do to keep the begging tone from my voice.

“Now?” she asks, looking up at me.

“No,” I say, feeling a brief flare of hope that she didn’t immediately shoot me down. “When we get back to Apple Creek.”

As though my words are a reminder to her that she was heading out, she starts walking again. We reach her car and the headlights flash as she unlocks it with the remote key. She pulls open the door.

“Well?” I ask, not wanting to let her leave when I have what seems like a momentary advantage. “What do you say about the drink?”

“Sam?” she says sweetly. She starts the car, the engine turning over with a roar.

“Yeah?” I lean over the open car door, shielding her with the umbrella.

“I’d rather have drinks with a crocodile.” She slams the door in my face, catching the side of the umbrella in the door and ripping it out of my hands as she reverses the car and backs away from me.

Rain dumps over me, drenching me instantly. I let out a yelp and sprint for my car. I struggle to unlock it, cursing as every second is more miserable. Falling inside, I start my car and reverse, determined to catch up to her. Not only is the weather awful, you can’t shake a stick out here without hitting at least five deer. I have no intention of letting her drive off into the stormy night without me behind her, helping light her way on the winding roads.

As I fishtail down the driveway after her, my tires bump over an object. I look in the rearview mirror and curse. On the road, crushed underneath my tires, is my mangled umbrella. Cami owes me.

I flick on my brights, determined to catch up to the infuriating woman. Heaven only knows what I’ll do when I catch her.

*Cami*

I drive away from Sam as quickly as I can, trying to convince myself that the shaking of my hands is from the wet chill and not from being so near to Sam again. *He's a snake*, I chant to myself as I drive through the darkness, peering through the rain-drenched windshield. The windshield wipers beat a rhythm as they sweep back and forth.

I need to remind myself because for a second there—longer than I care to admit—standing under that umbrella with him, it had felt like we were the only two people in the world. The deep timbre of his voice rolled over my skin as he asked me out for a drink and I am absolutely ashamed that my first reaction had been exhilaration.

Six months ago, all it had taken was one night for me to fall for him. I had thought I had found The One, my person, the man I would be marrying. And as much as my brain knows that's never going to happen, there's a part of my heart that still aches for him.

But that's just stupidity. My first loyalty is to Caroline, who has been the best boss, sister, and girlfriend wrapped into one. He hurt her and I could *never* face her if I was dating the enemy. Right? Right.

Still, the sight of his headlights behind me both thrills me and comforts me, like we're playing a game of tag in the dark. Driving through these backwoods roads is a little less terrifying knowing that he's with me.

My mind replays the moment standing next to him in the rain, feeling the heat of his body. I had been so distracted looking at him that the flash of lightning had startled me. Then he reached out to touch me and it was as though the lightning had already hit me.

Trying to distract myself, I turn the radio on and start singing along to a pop song. The lyrics are something about being betrayed by an ex and getting revenge. I lift my voice to belt it out so loudly, I hope Sam Perkins can hear it behind me.



I pass through a teeny, tiny town - one of those one-stoplight towns that are so common in the rural Midwest - with a grocery store, a small motel, and a gas station. The motel has one of those neon "Vacancy" signs that give off strong Bates Motel vibes. I shiver. I can't wait to hit the highway.

Just past the town, however, emergency flares and the blue and red flashing lights of emergency vehicles light up the night. A large road sign says in orange lights, "Road Washed Out."

*You've got to be kidding me.*

I stare at the flashers and emergency flares dotting the road in front of me, hoping that if I blink hard enough, it will all disappear. Unfortunately, no such luck. The only road back to civilization is flooded out in front of me.

Headlights shine in my rearview mirror, momentarily blinding me. Sam Perkins is still right behind me, just as trapped as me. I stare at his car like I expect him to get out of it and walk up to mine. But of course he doesn't. Why would he?

I chew on my lip as my gaze flips back to the flashing lights of a cop car. Even as the rain beats down, I can make out the shadow of a figure sitting behind the wheel. There's got to be a way out of this mess. A detour, a workaround, another road out. Heck, I'd take a flying carpet at this point. I just want to get home.

Opening the door, I'm instantly pelted by the rain. I pull my coat over my head to try to give myself some cover, but it's no use. The sky is unleashing buckets of water and it's only seconds before I can feel my clothes are soaked. Yuck.

I hurry over to the cop car. How I wish I was back in Apple Creek where at least I'd see a familiar face behind the uniform. Between my cousin serving in the police department and both my boss and my best friend dating cops, I'm on friendly terms with the entire force.

This one, though, stares at me as though he really wishes I would go away. I give him my biggest, most winning smile.

The one that got me out of more than a few scrapes back in the day. His expression doesn't change.

"Excuse me!" I say, trying to yell over the sound of the storm. I make a motion with my hand like rolling down a window.

He finally cracks the window open. "Can I help you, ma'am?" He has a strong country accent - the kind that would normally melt my insides - but his tone is cool.

"Can you tell me how to get to the highway?"

He jerks his thumb in the direction of the sign. "Road's flooded," he says, as though I can't read it for myself.

I keep smiling at him. "I see that. What's the detour?"

He smirks. "Turn back around thatta way."

My smile starts to slip. "There's got to be another way to get to the highway."

He shakes his head. "They're all flooded."

I lose the smile and go straight to Plan B: begging. "Please. I just want to get home. There's got to be a way."

He appears unmoved by my pleading. "You can sure try, ma'am, but you'll be risking getting your car stuck. We may not be able to fish you out till morning."

"What do I do, then?" I ask, more to myself than him, as he's been singularly unhelpful.

"Motel's back that way. Wait out the storm," he says.

I think back to the motel and shudder. Still, I don't exactly want to be driving around the dark, twisting roads at night and potentially driving straight into a puddle large enough to flood my engine.

"Thank you," I say to the policeman, politeness having been drilled into me from a young age by my mother.

He nods once and rolls up the window.

I jog back to my car as quickly as I can in my heels, watching for tripping hazards by the light of my car's

headlights. And only my car's headlights. Sam Perkins is nowhere to be found. Well, isn't that just to be expected from him, abandoning me in my hour of need.

I practically fall inside my car and yank the door shut, turning the heater in my car to full blast as I try to squeeze out some of the water from my clothes. It's no use. I'm a mess.

I turn the car around and head back to the scary motel. Just my luck. I'll probably be murdered out here in the sticks.

Turning off my car, I make a run for it to the lobby. *Please, let whatever room they have available have a clean comforter and a hot shower and I'll be ever so grateful. Not a single cross word will come out of my mouth ever again.*

As soon as I get inside, my eyes fall on a broad-shouldered back that unfortunately looks a little too familiar. With a turn of his head, I'm caught again by Sam Perkins' piercing blue eyes. He looks me up and down and I'm suddenly cognizant of the fact that I'm dripping enough water to require a mop on the lobby floor.

The heat flooding my face does nothing to warm me as I shift my weight on my feet and look around for a towel or some napkins.

"There you are, sir," the motel clerk says to Sam. "Room 109, just down to the left."

Sam thanks her and takes the key. Walking toward me, he says, "Looks like you got a little wet. I'd lend you my umbrella, but I'm afraid mine was caught in the car door you slammed in my face."

I ignore him and stalk forward to the motel clerk. "I need a room, please. Preferably one that's been recently cleaned. Is there a way to order food to the room?"

The clerk frowns at me. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but our rooms are sold out."

*Does everyone in this town hate me?* "Sold out? I don't understand. Your sign said vacancy."

“That gentleman just took the last room.” She points at Sam, who’s still standing in the lobby, messing with his phone.

My head turns from him to her. “You have to be joking. I don’t have anywhere to go. I need a room.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I can’t help you.”

I try to ignore the swell of panic that’s rising up in my throat. “Are there any other motels in this town? Hotels? Airbnb?” *Heck, I’ve never tried couchsurfing, but it’s starting to sound more attractive by the second.*

“No, ma’am, not that I know of. I’m sorry.”

“What do you suggest I do? Sleep in my car?” My hands grip the edge of the lobby desk until my knuckles turn white.

“I don’t know, ma’am. I’m sorry,” the clerk repeats, as though that’s helpful in any way.

*This can’t be real. This is a nightmare. Any second now, I’m going to wake up. It can’t get any worse.*

A throat clears behind me. “I have an idea.”

I slowly turn my head. Sam Perkins is standing there, dangling his room key in his hand. His expression is hard to decipher behind his annoying hipster glasses. I don’t say anything - I can’t - just wait for whatever foolishness is about to come out of his mouth next.

He pushes his glasses up his nose, then looks directly at me. “You can stay with me.”

The screaming sound inside my brain makes it official. *My nightmare just got worse.*

*Sam*

*I must be out of my mind.* Sharing a motel room with Cami is certainly on my list of Best Ideas Ever, but not when she's staring at me like I'm Freddy Kruger. My idea of a night with Cami involves roses, champagne, some sultry music. Not a freak thunderstorm in a backwater town.

Still, she looks so woebegone, drenched to the bone, all of her usual spit and fire extinguished. I absolutely cannot let her spend the night in the car.

"Stay with you?" Cami looks as though I've just suggested she spend the night in a snake pit.

I wrangle my temper. She acts like I'm evil incarnate, conveniently forgetting that not that long ago we were on a date. I would settle for her not acting like I'm a monster. "I don't see another option, do you?" I ask, keeping my tone reasonable.

She cocks her hip, managing to look regal despite her bedraggled state. "Sure I do. You can give me your room and you can spend the night in the car."

I laugh. "Nice try, but no thanks. We can both be warm in my room or you can be cold in your car. Your choice."

She crosses her arms. "I'd rather share a room with Satan."

I shrug, even as her comment stings me. "Forget it, then. So much for trying to help."

"You're trying to help me?" she scoffs. "More like entrap me. Just like you did with Jason. I can see the headline now: Mayor's Chief of Staff Embroiled in Scandal."

I choke on another laugh. "So in this little scenario you've cooked up in your mind, I'm the honey trap? That's flattering."

"It wasn't meant to be," she shoots back, even as she turns a delightful shade of red.

I grin. “Look, if I promise not to try to seduce you, will you come with me?”

If only Levi could see me now, he’d be laughing his butt off that I would even be in this position. He likes to pretend like I’m the town Casanova, which couldn’t be further from the truth.

“And absolutely no headlines or news stories,” she demands.

“None.” At least not about this. The article I already submitted to my editor from this evening’s political function flashes through my brain, but I push it aside. That’s not what she’s talking about.

“You promise?”

“You want me to pinky swear?”

“I want it in writing.”

I chuckle, then realize she isn’t laughing. “You’re serious right now?”

“Dead serious.”

I look around for something to write on. I grab a flyer and turn it over. Pulling a pen out of my bag, I write on it, “I, Sam Perkins, agree to not seduce Cami Moreno and not to publish an article about this night.” I pass it to her.

She reads it, like she’s checking to make sure every t is crossed. It’s both irritating and endearing. She finally looks up. “Fine.”

“Okay? Alright, let’s go.”

“Not so fast.”

I groan as I watch her pull out a pen and sign it.

She carefully folds the paper and puts it in her pocket. “Now we can go.”

I swallow my snarky comment and lead the way out of the lobby. Outside, the storm is still raging. I pause to take off my jacket and put it around her.

Her eyes flash up to me. “Thank you,” she says, as though the words are tough to get past her lips.

“You’re welcome.” No one can say my mama didn’t raise me to have manners.

She nods an acknowledgement, which gives me just the teensiest bit of hope that she hates me a little less.

We dart down the barely-covered walkway to the room. I open the door, eyeing the flimsy lock-in-name-only. Probably a good kick could get the door down. I just hope there’s not a reason for me to find out.

The door opens directly into the bedroom. To say it’s spartan would be an understatement. There’s a bed, a television on a stand, and a side chair that looks like it’s seen some things.

Cami stands next to me and the silence is stifling. I clear my throat. “Cozy,” I say, the only word I can think of. For a man who makes a living by words, I’m not sure what to say.

“Claustrophobic,” she says. She seems one breath away from peacing out and taking her chances with sleeping in the car over the room.

Someone has to take charge of this situation. “C’mon, it’s not that bad. It’s warm. It’s clean...I think. There’s a bed.” I sit down on it and it lets out a squeak loud enough to wake the dead. “Might be a spring or two loose.”

Cami starts laughing and even if there’s a slight edge of hysteria to it, it breaks the awkwardness. I laugh too, and it feels like a load comes off my shoulders that I hadn’t even known I was carrying.

She’s as beautiful to me as ever, but it’s obvious she’s still soaked through and shivering under my coat. For a second, everything in me yearns to embrace her, wrap her up in my warmth. But I don’t make a move, knowing how unwelcome it would be.

I cast around for something to give her to warm her up and my eye falls on the door to the bathroom. “There’s probably a shower in there. If you want to take one.”

I look back at her and see the crease forming between her eyebrows. I quickly add, “To warm up, I mean. Not because I think you need a shower.”

Her frown deepens. “You want me to take a shower here... while you’re here?”

“No,” I say, holding up a hand in defense. “I’ll leave.”

Just at that moment, a flash of lightning followed by a rolling boom shakes the room. The walls shudder like a leaf and I wonder for a second if the whole thing is going to come down on us.

“You’re going out in that?” she asks.

“Just for a few minutes. Just to give you some privacy.”

Her eyes move to the window and I can only imagine it looks like it’s about time to start building the ark. Her gaze moves back to mine. “That’s sweet,” she says, her voice a touch uncertain.

I get to my feet, slapping my hands against my thighs as I smile. “About time you started seeing it.”

Cami smiles at me, and I could crow with victory that I’ve finally coaxed one out of her. “Don’t get cocky now,” she says with a wry twist to her mouth.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, ma’am.” I tip my non-existent hat to her.

“And don’t start calling me ma’am,” she scolds. “The cop did that and I didn’t appreciate it one bit.”

“Your wish is my command.”

She giggles and tries to cover it in an awkward cough. The sound makes my heart dance in my chest. “Get out of here.”

“Alright. I won’t go too far in case you need anything.”

“Okay. Thank you.” The words seem to come easier to her this time.

I head outside, hunching as the cold and the wet hit me like a slap. I thought I had seen the bright light of a vending



machine at the end of the row. I whistle a bit, feeling happier than I have in a long time at the thought of returning to Cami and her hating me a little less.

The vending machine is where I thought and I start feeding money into it, punching selections. I don't know what she would want, so I get a little of everything - or as much as I can with twenty bucks. One of the bags of chips gets stuck and I bang on the glass.

Just as I'm finally fishing the last of the treats out of the vending machine, there's a flash of lightning and then a loud pop. Every light around me goes out. The entire block - and every light in the motel - is pitch black.

I grab everything and race back to the room. *Cami.*

*Cami*

*Don't panic. Don't panic. Don't panic.* I chant the words in my head, even as my heart batters in my chest at being plunged into sudden and complete darkness. Hot water still pours over my head, disconcerting in the dark. My fingers touch the sides of the shower to ground myself.

“Sam?” I call out, my voice tremulous. “Are you out there?”

Silence. All my fears upon first seeing the motel return with a vengeance. Is this when the serial killer attacks? Am I about to become the star of a Dateline special? What do I even have in here to defend myself? *I really should have taken that self-defense course my best friend Linda kept pushing on me...*

I finish rinsing as my brain and my fears continue to spiral, imagining the worst.

A loud bang from the door flying open shocks me and I scream. I scramble for something, anything, to defend myself, and my hands grasp at an object. It's one of the little all-in-one shampoo bottles that the motel provides. *Just great. I'm definitely going to die.*

“Cami!” a male voice shouts. “Are you okay?”

My heart stutters back to life. “Sam? Oh my goodness, is that you?”

“Yes! Of course it is. Are you alright? I heard you scream.”

I hear him move closer to the shower and I realize he's just on the other side of the shower curtain, while I'm standing under the spray still naked. My hands involuntarily move to cover myself, even though neither he nor I can see even an inch in front of our faces. “Stop! Don't come any closer!”

“Just tell me if you're hurt. I can go get help.” The shower curtain rings shift against the shower rail like he's right on the other side, touching the curtain.

In the dark, the distance feels negligible, as though he's in the shower with me. "I'm fine!" I squeal, adrenaline shooting painfully through my veins. "I was just frightened."

"You're sure?" The shower curtain rings shift again.

"Yes! Totally fine!"

"Okay," he says. "Can I help you get anything?"

I swallow, wanting to tell him to go away. "My towel. I can't see my towel."

"No problem. Just give me a second." Sounds of fumbling on the other side of the curtain. "Found it. I'll just, uh, pass it inside the shower."

I shut off the shower and wait, my insides in turmoil. The curtain shifts to the side, a rush of cool air entering the shower stall. I'm totally exposed to him, even though he can't see. My whole body flushes hot, then cold. I reach out for the towel and instead of grabbing it, I grab his hand instead. I hear his sharp intake of breath and I let go like I've been burned. "I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't—I couldn't—"

"It's alright," he says. "I'm just holding out the towel. Try again. I don't want to reach in to you in case..."

His voice trails off, but I know what he means. He doesn't want to reach in and risk touching my naked skin. I swallow hard and reach out again, this time grabbing the towel easily. "I have it," I say, my words shaky. I wrap the towel around myself tightly. "You can go now."

Footsteps immediately back away. "Okay, I'll be right outside. You can just, you know, give a yell if there's, uh, anything else you need."

His stumbling words make me feel slightly better that I'm not the only one struggling with the awkwardness of the situation. "Okay. Thank you."

After the door closes softly, I finally feel safe enough to unwrap and dry off, wringing out my hair. I can't quite process that I went from one date with Sam Perkins, to hating him, to now having been in a room naked with him. No matter how

dark, it doesn't change the facts. How am I going to look him in the eye after this?

Despite having been on a million first dates, I can count on two fingers the number of men I've been naked with and neither of them are named Sam Perkins. Until now.

I take more time than I probably need to finish drying. When I realize I've been stalling, I force myself to take a deep breath and open the door. The small room beyond is totally dark.

"Sam?" I ask.

"I'm here." The noisy squeak of the mattress tells me he's on the bed. I swallow hard, trying to keep my mind from imagining him. Lying in the dark. Waiting for me.

"I, uh, don't have any other clothes, so I'll put on my old ones."

"Okay," Sam says.

No additional sounds come from the bed.

"Turn your back," I say, the words forced out of my tight throat. I cannot stand the thought of him lying on the bed, his eyes on me.

"What? I can't even see you. I can't even see my own hand."

"I don't care," I say stiffly. "Turn your back."

The mattress springs squeal and I can hear him shifting. I quickly move to put on my damp, clammy clothes from earlier. I really wish I had thought to pack an overnight bag. Mental note for next time.

"You decent?" Sam's voice says from the darkness.

"Yes."

A cellphone flashlight turns on, the light a welcome beacon in the all-encompassing dark. I can see Sam's shadowed figure on the bed, his face half-illuminated. The flashlight points at a spread of snacks on the bed. "Ta-da."

“Sam, if you had a flashlight, why didn’t you use that earlier?”

If it wasn’t dark, I would swear he was blushing. “You, uh, didn’t have any clothes on. I didn’t want to make you feel uncomfortable.”

Once again, he has surprised me with his consideration. This just isn’t the Sam Perkins that I know—or thought I knew. “Oh. Thank you.”

“You hungry?” he asks.

“I guess I could eat.” I move over to gingerly sit on the bed with him, all too aware of his presence on the other side. It’s really not fair that he’s so attractive; it makes it hard to remember all the reasons I hate him.

The mattress squeals as I sit down, which makes me blush like I’ve been caught doing something wrong. I focus on the feast in front of me, which looks like he bought everything in the vending machine. “Wow, you got all this?”

“Picnic in paradise,” Sam says, a wry note to his voice.

My heart softens. I’ve never had anyone prepare a picnic for me. Even in the strangest of circumstances that I find myself in, it’s sweet. “It’s not bad,” I manage.

“You sound surprised.”

My fingers pick at the hem of my dress. “I guess I am.”

“Why?”

I struggle to find an acceptable answer. “I guess I didn’t expect you to be so generous.”

“Why not?”

“It’s just not been my experience with you.”

“Why do you assume the worst about me?”

I’m starting to feel like a bug he’s trying to pin down. “Why so many questions? Are you interviewing me right now?”

He chuckles. “No. Just trying to understand you. I feel like we got off on the wrong foot.”

“Well, you did barge into the bathroom while I was in the shower...”

“Not now. Six months ago.”

My hackles instantly rise and I shift back. “You know why that is.” *You were a two-faced snake, promising me one thing, getting my hopes up, making me see a future with you, and then ruining them. It hurt. A lot.*

“Not really. You wouldn’t talk to me after that. Wouldn’t take my calls. Would barely speak to me.”

It’s amazing how hurt he sounds when he was the one who caused it in the first place. “You really want to talk about this? Now?”

“Not like we’ve got anything better to do to pass the time.”

“I’m too tired to want to fight with you, Sam. We could just eat some snacks, go to sleep, and go our separate ways tomorrow without excavating the past. Keep everything nice and polite.” *Please. What is there to gain from re-hashing what might have been?*

He shifts on the mattress, not much but enough that the mattress squeals again. “Well, see, that’s what I don’t want to do.”

“What don’t you want to do?” I ask, almost afraid to know the answer.

And when it comes, his voice is soft, yet laden with meaning. “I don’t want to go our separate ways.”

My breath whooshes out. Even I can’t ignore the way my heart does a somersault. *I’m in trouble.*

*Sam*

I try to read her expression across the bed from me. The light from the flashlight casts shadows on her face and I can't tell what she's thinking. She doesn't respond to my comment and the silence becomes an uncomfortable weight between us.

I'm still sweating from barging in on Cami while she was in the shower. My mind wants to keep focusing on the fact that I was in the same bathroom with her while she was naked, water coursing over her skin, flushed under the heat—*nope, nope, nope. Stop thinking, Sam. Wipe it directly from your memory. Control-alt-delete, restart.*

Plastic crinkles loudly in the silence as Cami picks up a bag of chips and opens it.

"Chips, huh?" I ask, trying to break the awkwardness.

"What?" she asks me, shooting me a look I sense more than see.

"Nothing. Just an interesting choice." I can't help my natural urge to needle her. Just a bit.

"Oh my word," she groans. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I just thought you'd be a chocolate kind of girl. You know, sweet." I give her my most winning smile, the one known to get me more than my fair share of news tips—if only she could see it in the dark.

"I am *not* sweet, Sam," she scoffs. "I would think you would know that by now."

I clear my throat. "Actually, I barely know you. You only gave me one date."

She sighs. "Back to that again." I can hear her munching on a chip.

"I just want a chance to explain." I don't know if it will make a difference or not, but I have to try. I doubt Cami will

give me another opportunity. I don't know whether God, or the universe, or just dumb luck has brought us together tonight, but I'm taking full advantage of it.

She takes a breath, lets it out slowly. "Okay, explain. You have until I finish this bag of chips."

I sit up, causing a giant squeal from the mattress. "Really?"

"Yes." A chip crunches. "And now you're down one chip."

"Alright." I scramble to think of the words that I want to say. "My job is to report the truth."

"What you *think* is the truth," she interjects.

"Is this your story or mine?" I ask.

"Fine, fine, go ahead." She loudly crunches another chip.

"Like I was saying, my job is to report the truth. The public has a right to peek behind the curtain of political campaigns. In this case, I know she's your boss and your friend, but there's no disputing the fact that Caroline Wickers put together a plan to fake date Jason Masterson to garner votes."

"They ended up falling in love," she protests.

"They did," I say, "but that wasn't how it started. It was dishonest."

"It wasn't the best plan," she admits.

I taste victory. "So you agree that the people of Apple Creek deserved to know that they were being tricked?"

"I didn't say that."

"Only because of your personal connection to Caroline Wickers. Face it, Cami, you're biased." I point a finger at her.

She throws a chip at me. "I'm not biased. I just think that people make political deals all the time, endorse people for campaigns that they don't really care about. Caroline's approach was no different. It was just...unconventional."



I snort. “I’d say. Regardless, you’re just proving my point. If I had found out about any other similar endorsements, I’d have reported on them, too.”

“You almost cost her the campaign,” Cami protests, her voice rising. “She’s been a fantastic mayor for Apple Creek, and you almost ruined it for her.”

“*Almost* being the operative word in both of those sentences.”

“If it wasn’t for the prior mayor being as old as Father Time, she may not have won!” She has more passion than if she herself had been running. “Think about what that would have meant for the town!”

“Your argument is still about her, and not about whether it was right in the first place to report on it to the citizens of Apple Creek. Your loyalty to your friend is admirable—truly—but it has nothing to do with me and what I did. I wish you would separate the two.” And right there is the kernel of it. If she could just get past her indignation on behalf of her friend, I think she’d give me another chance.

Instead, she bursts into choked laughter. “Are you kidding me right now? You confronted Jason about the fake relationship. You tried to blackmail him into doing you a political favor if you didn’t publish the story! How is that about truth and honesty or whatever else you’re using to try to rationalize your actions?”

My heart drops as I see the real cause of the friction between the two of us. And I don’t know if I can overcome it because she’s absolutely right. On the bare face of it, without any context, it would have been a despicable and completely unethical move to try to blackmail the police captain that way. But she doesn’t know the full truth. “That’s not why I said that. I never had any intention of blackmailing the captain.”

She stares at me. “I don’t believe you.”

I move closer to her, the bed squealing. “You’re right that I confronted Jason. It was my instinct as a journalist after I had been given a tip by the police chief. And Jason basically

admitted to it. But I knew as soon as he did that I wouldn't be able to use the story, so I made up a reason instead as to why I wasn't going to publish it."

"Why weren't you going to publish it?"

This is the moment I've been waiting for. My chance to lay it on the line. "Because I knew it would hurt you. And I never wanted to do that."

Silence falls between us. I can almost hear the gears grinding in her head as she weighs my words. Then she sniffs. "It's a nice line—a good story you're trying to sell me—but I don't believe you."

"Why not?"

"Because you turned around and *did* publish the story the very next day! So much for not wanting to hurt me!" Her voice breaks on the last word and she scoots backward, away from me, her face moving back into the shadows. She wraps her arms wrap around herself.

My heart aches. "I don't know what to tell you. All I have is the truth. I did confront Jason. I did hear his admission. I didn't want to use it because I didn't want to hurt you," I repeat. "But I felt obligated to tell my boss, so I did, and he insisted we run the story. So we did. I'm sorry that you were hurt."

"You're sorry that I was hurt—not, you're sorry that you published the story in the first place." She laughs again, a sad rather than happy sound.

I shake my head slowly. "I know that's what you want me to say. And if I was a liar, someone just saying whatever it took to make you happy, I would say that. But I can't in all honesty tell you that. Because I was doing my job."

"And that makes it all right?"

"I don't know if it makes it all right. I just know that it's the truth. I just wish you would forgive me for it."

She makes a small sound that I can't decipher. "The truth. That's what you keep saying. Well, here's another truth. I

don't forgive you. Sometimes we have to make a judgment call. And you made the wrong one." She crumples the bag in her hand. "Anyway, you're out of time. If you don't mind, I just want to go to sleep and hope that this night ends as quickly as possible."

My heart falls. It's over. I took my shot and I missed. No matter how much I had hoped otherwise, Cami isn't willing to meet me halfway, and she definitely isn't going to give me another chance.

*Cami*

I can't sleep. I'm tossing and turning on the uncomfortable mattress, making it squeal every time. The only bright side is that I'm alone in the bed, Sam having elected to "be a gentleman" and sleep on the floor.

Sam's words echo in my head. Had I been too quick to judge him? Too harsh? Had he really lied to Jason to protect me? Or was he lying to me now, just trying to make himself look good?

It's hard for me to judge his actions without bias. I've been on what feels like a million dates and it's never worked out. I make jokes about all the dumb—and sometimes awful—things guys do so we can laugh, but the reality is that bad date after bad date has made me distrust men. Too many of them act like they would say anything to get what they want—whether that's a date, a kiss, or something more.

Is Sam really any different? Or just another smooth talker? It's so hard to tell. For one thing, his too-handsome face clouds my brain. Any time I get near him, I struggle to think. And that was *before* the whole naked-in-the-shower incident. My face turns to fire just thinking about it.

Beyond the face that God gifted him, Sam also has the most impressive wit of anyone I know. I am a closet political fanatic. It's why I jumped onto Caroline's campaign with both feet. As dumb as it sounds, the fact that Sam is a treasure trove of obscure political trivia makes me weak in the knees. Debating the finer points of the Constitution is more of a turn-on than anything any other man has done on a date.

I turn onto my side. I *want* to forgive him. I want to give him another chance, to put the past behind us and try again. Maybe he wouldn't be such a weasel the second time around.

I turn onto my other side. Then again, what would stop him? Especially if I show myself to be a doormat by forgiving him. As the saying goes, fool me once, shame on me, fool me

twice...The fact that he's so smart just makes me suspect him all the more.

I turn again. On the other hand, there just aren't that many single men in Apple Creek. Especially not crazy smart, wickedly handsome, single men who are gainfully employed, within a reasonable distance of my age, and not living at home with their mothers. And hasn't his behavior tonight been exemplary? He could have taken advantage on more than one occasion, but he hasn't. He's been a total gentleman.

I roll onto my back, heaving a sigh. I just don't know what to do. I wish I could call my best friend, but it's the middle of the night and she probably wouldn't appreciate being woken up. I'm all alone, in the dark, all too aware of Sam's sleeping presence on the floor next to me.

Then again, he's probably not sleeping at all. I roll back onto my side. "Sam," I whisper. "Are you awake?"

"Not like I could sleep with all the squeaking you're doing up there," Sam says, his voice as loud and clear as a bell.

I laugh despite myself. "Sorry. This mattress is the worst."

"Want me to sing you a lullaby?"

"Tempting, but no." Argh, it is so hard to stay mad at the man when he makes me laugh so much.

"Are you sure? I'm a wonderful tenor," he deadpans.

"Really? Alright, let's hear it." I'm calling his bluff.

"You asked for it." He launches into the opening lines of what I vaguely recognize as "Danny Boy." His voice fills the room as I lie in the bed, quiet, as I listen to him. He wasn't bragging earlier; he really does have a wonderful singing voice. As the last note dies out, I find myself wiping a tear from my eye.

"Well?" he asks when I haven't said anything for a few beats.

"Not bad," I say, which is about all I'll give him.

“I’m going to take that as high praise,” he says, his tone smug as he sees through me. “I sang acapella all four years in college.”

“Really?” I ask. I guess I can see that. Sam has always struck me as a bit of a showman.

“Yes, really. You sound surprised. Didn’t think I had it in me, did you?”

“Maybe. But then I don’t know what you were like before six months ago.”

“Well, ask me.”

“Ask you what?” I stare up into the darkness.

“Ask me anything and I’ll tell you. Here, I’ll make it easy for you. I’ll tell you my life story.”

A chuckle escapes my lips. “Good. That’ll put me to sleep for sure.”

“Great. Let’s see. I was born outside of Indianapolis. My parents moved to Apple Creek when I was fourteen because my dad lost his job at a paper factory. That’s what first got me interested in politics, by the way. The deal was made behind closed doors and it resulted in the loss of hundreds of people’s jobs, including my dad. I left Apple Creek as soon as I graduated.” He continues talking, his voice a soothing lullaby all of its own. I close my eyes and let it roll over me like a wave. It’s comforting, like being wrapped in a warm blanket of Sam.

I’m almost asleep when I vaguely hear him ask, “What about you?”

“Hmm?” I murmur.

He chuckles. “I guess I really did put you to sleep.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s not a problem. Look, I’d love to hear your story, too, but if you’d rather sleep, that’s okay, too. I’ll just be down here if you need me for more sleep remedies. There’s plenty more material where that came from. I didn’t even tell you about the

time I won a blue ribbon at the state history fair or my winning streak as a ‘mathlete.’”

“Sounds scintillating,” I say, yawning. But some of his words do make me pause as I remember that as uncomfortable as I am up here, he’s probably even more uncomfortable on the ground. I swallow, thinking over my words before I say them, wanting to be sure. “Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to come up on the bed?” My heart beats loudly in my ears. Am I really saying this? To Sam Perkins? “Just to sleep. No funny business.”

Silence. I’ve stunned him speechless, which is a feat I didn’t think possible.

Then come the sounds of movement, cloth scraping against cheap carpet. In the darkness, I can just make out his shape as his head appears over the side of the bed. “Are you sure?”

“It’s not that great an offer. This mattress sucks,” I quip.

“I’ll take it,” he says, his words as soft and serious as though I’ve offered him something far more meaningful. *Which I haven’t, have I?* “But only if you’re sure.”

I have to clear my throat to get the words out. “I’m sure.” *I’m the farthest thing from sure. This could be the worst decision of my life.*

“Okay.” He sits on the edge of the mattress, then lays down. Facing each other, our noses are mere feet apart. I could reach out and touch him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I say, my voice soft.

“I can still sing if you want me to,” he adds. “Plenty of songs in my repertoire.”

I smile and yawn again. “I’ll pass.”

“Your loss.”

I close my eyes and before I know it, I’ve drifted off to sleep, with a smile on my lips. I dream of a man with ocean

blue eyes behind black-rimmed glasses who sings lullabies in  
my sleep.



*Sam*

I wake up the next morning feeling happier than I have in what feels like forever. I keep my eyes closed just to savor the moment. *I slept in the same bed as Cami and she didn't kick me out.*

Not only that, but I woke up sometime in the early morning to find her curled up next to me, her body pressed to mine. I'm sure it was just her body's unconscious seeking of my heat in the cold motel room, but I don't care. It felt heavenly as I placed an arm over her middle and hugged her closer to me before drifting back to sleep.

Nothing happened, of course. The last place I would have wanted anything to happen is this small, rundown motel in the backwoods of Indiana. If I were to actually have the privilege of a romantic night with her, it would involve wine and roses and not even the glimmer of a possibility that she could chalk it up to a momentary lapse of judgment.

Even more important than how we slept is that I felt the smallest crack in the wall that Cami built up against me. More than anything, I want to take advantage of that and tear down the rest. Maybe she'll even agree to giving me another try at dating.

As for the woman in question, my hand reaches out to the other side of the bed only to come up cold and empty. I crack open an eye to see that, just as I feared, she's gone.

That wakes me up faster than a cup of coffee thrown in my face. I clamber out of bed, listening intently for any sign that she's in the bathroom. Nothing.

I'm about to race outside to try to find her when I see a scrap of paper on the television stand. My heart returns to normal levels as I grab it. At first, all I see is a blur, and I have to remember to grab my glasses. I push them up my nose with a hurried hand.

“Going out for coffee,” the note says in a scribble with looping letters. “Be right back.”

Even better. I relax the tension in my shoulders. *She'll be back. She hasn't left forever.*

While I wait, I take a shower. Might as well be fresh and clean for when she returns. The power seems to have returned during the night and I thankfully have some hot water. I keep an ear attuned for the opening of the door, the scuff of a footstep, the jingle of keys. Sounds that never come.

*Well, maybe there was an extra long line at the coffee shop.* I pull my clothes back on and make a limited effort to style my hair before giving up.

My eyes keep returning to the motel door, which never opens no matter how much my heart urges it to. All I want in the world is to see it open and see Cami's smiling face, coffee in hand, ready to explore whatever we have started here.

My heart rate starts to pick up again. Maybe she's hurt. Maybe she got in an accident. Maybe something happened while I'm standing here like an idiot instead of helping her.

I grab my phone, which still has twenty percent power. No messages from Cami. But I do see an alert: my article from last night posted.

*Oh no.* My heart sinks as I click the alert to open the article. The first thing I see is the headline: “Apple Creek Mayor Wines and Dines Billionaire for Major Campaign Pay-off.”

My heart clenches. In my defense, the headline sounded good last night. Hard hitting journalism. Exposing the political underbelly. But if Cami saw it...well, let's just say that I doubt she viewed it quite the same way.

I pull up Cami's contact, still stored in my phone, and message her. “Still out for coffee? Looking forward to seeing you again.” I hesitate and then add a heart-eyes emoji. Then delete it. Then add it back. Before I can overthink it, I press send.

I wait anxiously, waiting for my phone to ding with the arrival of her response. No dings and she still doesn't return.

My apprehension grows as I start reading the comments on the article. I hit a chord, all right. The good voters of Apple Creek didn't appreciate any indication that their mayor might be ensnared by outside interests, and definitely not by a foreign billionaire. And by "foreign," they mean anyone who doesn't live in Apple Creek.

The level of vitriol is maybe even more than I bargained for. The blood drains from my face as the comments start to devolve from politics into straight-up misogyny as people use the excuse to call Mayor Wickers every name in the book. It's a rollercoaster ride and the comments seem to be snowballing into an avalanche.

*Where was Levi? Shouldn't someone be monitoring and moderating the comments?* I quickly call my editor.

"Great job on the article," Levi says. Despite being an older man, Levi is built like a tank and he keeps both his hair and his body ready to pass any Marine inspection. He's been a personal mentor to me throughout my career, starting from when I was a high school intern, so normally I would bask in his praise, but not now. "You should see the click rate on it. I think it might even make state news."

"Have you seen the comments?" I ask, cutting him off.

"Rolling in, eh? Attaboy," he praises me. Outside of God and country, there's nothing Levi likes more than organic traction.

"It's a torrent of filth, verging on hate speech against the mayor."

"What? Aren't you moderating them?"

"No," I exclaim, barely able to keep my voice lower than a shout. "I've been stuck in the middle of nowhere due to the road being flooded out. I thought I told you—"

But then I realize that I hadn't told him. I had been so focused on Cami I had forgotten to tell my editor that he would have to take over comment moderation.

“We need to fix this,” I say, desperation clawing at me. As my text to Cami continues to go unanswered, it seems increasingly likely that she saw the article and is back to hating my guts again. “Quickly.”

“Sam,” Levi says, his tone an admonishment. “I’m looking at the comments now. I’m not sure I see the problem.”

“What do you mean? Some of them are calling her awful names, things we would never put in print.” All I can think about is how Cami must have felt to have spent the night in bed with me, and then wake up to this article. She must be furious. Worse—she must think I am the lowest form of scum. Somewhere below pond algae and that ring that forms in the toilet bowl.

“People have a right to their opinion. You know that as well as I do. It would go against everything both of us believe in to censor them.”

“It’s not censorship,” I protest. I struggle for a better way to describe it. For a man who makes a living with his words, I strangely have none now.

Levi pauses a beat. “I’m actually a little surprised to hear you say this. I’ve never heard you try to hide criticism of the mayor.”

I rock back on my heels. “This is different.”

“How?”

*Because I don’t want to hurt Cami and I know that this has.* But I can’t say that. Not only would Levi ‘not give a rat’s patooty,’ as he’s been known to say but in more colorful language, it would make him question me as an unbiased journalist.

“This isn’t political commentary,” I try. “It’s hate speech.” But I feel torn even saying that. Would I have said the same yesterday?

“You sure you’re feeling okay, Sam?” Levi asks. “I would have thought you would be more excited about the attention the article is receiving and less concerned about protecting the mayor. It’s unlike you.”

He's right, even if it doesn't sit well with me. I had been clamoring for another chance to work for the bigger city newspapers, to claw my way back with every reader click and comment. But was that really all I cared about—clicks on the internet? What did that say about me? “Just doing my due diligence.”

“I will scan the comments and remove anything that violates our policy,” Levi says. My heart sinks further. Levi is a firm defender of freedom of speech and anything short of a direct threat to the mayor's safety will pass his review. “Why don't you take some time? I'll let you know if we get a call from one of the television stations.”

I hang up with him and grab my keys. I have only one thought in my mind: *I have to find Cami.*

*Cami*

*I must be the most gullible, dumber-than-a-box-of-rocks girl this side of I-70.* I cannot believe I let Sam Perkins pull a fast one on me. Yet. Again. I could just scream.

As I tear down the highway like a bat out of hell, the endless miles of road melt away and all I can think about is last night and how everything had changed in an instant.

I had woken this morning with warmth surrounding me. My first thought was how safe I felt, how protected, how *cherished*. I felt the weight of a muscled arm around me and I thought that I must be dreaming—but it was a dream that I never wanted to leave. I wanted nothing more in the world than to be so entirely embraced. I nestled further into the warmth, then froze as I realized that the rock-hard weight behind me wasn't a dream at all, but a real, live man.

A man who just happened to be my ex-turned-quasi-mortal-enemy-turned-back-to-possible-romantic-interest.

I had rotated in his arms, careful not to wake him as I stared up at his face. Without his glasses, Sam looked less intimidating, less arrogant. In sleep he wasn't wearing his trademark smirk and his lips didn't utter devastating zingers that could make a person feel five inches tall. He was approachable, even vulnerable. I reached out a hand to brush back the dark curl that always fell over his forehead.

Sam stirred, murmuring something in his sleep, and his arm tightened around me. My heart beat a little more rapidly. Maybe I had been wrong to judge him so harshly. Hadn't he proven himself, at least a little bit, over this past night? And as much as it pained me to admit it, he did have a point that engaging in a fake dating scheme to gain votes wasn't Caroline's best idea ever. Maybe—*maybe*—we could at least start over.

As much as I wanted to stay in Sam's arms forever, or at least until he woke up, my body's need for caffeine made me get up. I slowly extricated myself, scribbled Sam a note,

grabbed my purse, and left the room. I turned my phone back on as I walked to my car.

I was not prepared. As soon as my phone reconnected to the mobile network, the texts had started to roll in. About twenty, increasingly incensed texts came from Caroline, who first informed me of Sam's latest published attack on her, and then all the terrible trolls that were commenting. They sounded truly vile.

I had stared at my phone, one hand on my car door handle. My gaze flicked over to the door I had just closed, and the man still sleeping behind it.

Part of me wanted to march back right then and there, rail at him, demand answers. *How* could he have published that article when he had promised me there would be no headline from last night? How could he have lied to me and tricked me? And most importantly, how did he convince me to be blinded by him again?

But the other part of me wanted nothing more than to never see him again. I also knew that the answers didn't lie with Sam; they obviously lay with me. Liars lie, and that's the truth. Sam was a snake and he was just doing what was in a snake's nature. Can't blame a snake for biting if you're dumb enough to mess around with one.

The problem was clearly me, and that I was so desperate or so lonely that I had to keep falling for the same man's tricks. So, no, I wasn't going to confront him. I needed to confront myself.

I pulled open the door to my car, thanking God that I hadn't left any of my belongings behind in the room, and I got inside. Without another look, I drove off.

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An hour later, I finally exit the highway and make the turn onto the road that leads straight into Apple Creek. Every mile closer to home helps me breathe a little easier. There's only one place that I want to go, and that's straight to my best friend, Linda's, place.

On my way, I call Caroline to talk her through the situation and crisis management tactics. I put my feelings about Sam in a box and bury it deeply so I could do what I needed to do professionally. But as soon as I hang up with Caroline, the tears start flowing so freely that I have to slow down so I don't wreck.

When I pull onto Linda's street, I'm confronted by a patrol car about to pull out. Through our respective windshields, I meet the gaze of Russ, Linda's boyfriend. I can tell from the sympathetic expression on his face that Linda's already told him the news, which I had texted her on the way.

I hate it. I mean, I don't hate that he is sympathetic or that he knows, but shame floods my whole body in a hot, prickling rush. I am not that girl that has to be pitied. And I hate—absolutely hate with every cell of my body—that Sam has turned me into that girl.

I roll out of my car and almost sprint up to Linda's door, pounding on it. As soon as she opens her door, I break down sobbing.

"Aw, come on in, honey," Linda says, ushering me inside with a hug. "I've already got Friends reruns playing on the television. There's tequila, chamomile tea, and several quarts of Ben and Jerry's in the freezer. Pick your poison."

And this is why I love her. No judgment, no questions, just comfort. I swaddle myself in cozy blankets on Linda's couch and curl up with Ross, Rachel, Chandler, Monica, Joey, and Phoebe. Linda brings me a bowl that looks like she just upended two full pints into it and stuck in a spoon, bless her.

Soon enough, though, the whole story spills out of me. Linda sits and calmly listens as I tell her everything that happened, and all of my conflicted feelings—most of all, my feeling of being tricked yet again by him and the utter shame I feel for that.

"There's nothing for you to feel ashamed about," Linda says, as soon as I've finished. "Absolutely nothing."



“You don’t think I’ve been an idiot?” I ask as I stick another spoonful of ice cold, chocolate comfort in my mouth.

“About what? You made do with a bad situation and stayed in the same motel room. Nothing happened between you. And it turns out he’s the same snake he’s always been, so nothing’s changed there either.”

I digest what she’s saying. She’s right. Technically nothing happened between us, and yet this morning, just a few hours ago, I had woken up in his arms. I had felt comfortable, even loved, as crazy as that sounds. I had looked at his sleeping face and I had thought of giving it another try with him, even imagined a future with him.

And that right there was the problem.

“You’re right,” I say. “I guess I just built something in my mind.”

“You wanted him to be different,” she says. “Better than he is.”

“Yeah, I guess.” The words don’t sit right with me as soon as they’ve left my mouth, though. It’s as though some small part of my heart is still clinging to the vision I had of Sam.

“You’re going to be okay,” Linda says. She rubs my arm.

“Thank you,” I say, giving her a hug. “You’re the best friend a girl could ever hope for.”

“Not yet,” she says, pulling out her phone. “But I’m about to be.”

My eyes widen. “What are you going to do?”

She just gives me a mischievous smile as she sends off a text. “Sam Perkins better hope he’s following the law to the *letter*. Because he’s about to get some up-close and personal scrutiny from the Apple Creek Police Department.”

*Sam*

I've barely crossed the Apple Creek city line when I see flashing blue and red lights in my rear view mirror.

I curse under my breath. "You've got to be kidding me." Where had that cruiser even come from? I hadn't seen it, but then I've been a bit busy trying to simultaneously drive and review any incoming comments on the article, hoping to remove the most egregious ones before Levi approves them.

I put on my turn blinker and hit my brake pedal, slowing down as I navigate to the side of the four lane road.

The police cruiser pulls to a stop right behind me, looming large and menacing in my rear view mirror. I keep my hands at ten and two on the wheel, mindful of all the cautions that you should never make any sudden movements when you're about to interact with the police.

Two cops get out of the cruiser, one on each side. They're both wearing the dark blue uniform of the police department, aviator glasses, and a grim set to their mouths. They're big dudes and while I'm no slouch at fitness, let's face it, lifting a keyboard isn't exactly the same as pumping iron. I shrink a little in my seat.

They approach until all that's framed in both the driver and passenger windows is their utility belts, boasting a Taser, silver handcuffs, and the department's standard issue firearm. The one on my side twirls his finger for me to roll down my window.

"Good morning, sir," I say, trying to sound my most patient, even as my eyes keep straying to my clock.

"License and registration," the officer replies. Not a flicker of a smile on his lips. Where do these guys learn their community relations skills?

"Sure," I say, keeping my tone friendly as I reach for my wallet. "Can you tell me what the problem is?"

He doesn't answer until he has both documents in his hands. "Do you know how fast you were going?"

Relief replaces my initial sense of trepidation, followed swiftly by annoyance. "This is about speeding?"

I can see only my own reflection in his mirrored glasses. "You were clocked going eighty in a fifty-five zone."

Ouch, the cost of that ticket is going to be no small chunk of change. "You know that's a speed trap, right? It drops from seventy on the highway to fifty-five with no warning."

"I don't make the laws, sir," he says, his tone bored.

The stress of the morning fuels my tongue. "I guess that's how the city funds the police department since the taxpayers keep refusing to pass the levies."

Even behind his sunglasses, I can feel him leveling his gaze at me. "I'm not here to debate the speed limits. I just enforce them."

"Right," I say, unable to stop my upper lip from curling in a slight sneer. "Of course, I do happen to remember the city council approving a large investment in renovating the police department's fitness equipment." Probably explains the size of these guys. "I can see where the money's coming from. Can't just be paying for donuts."

The one in front of me shifts back and I can tell he's exchanging a look with his partner over the top of my car. "Would you step out of the car, sir?" he asks.

Instantly I know I've made a mistake letting my mouth run. I hold up my hands. "Look, I'm sorry, I've had a rough morning. I didn't mean anything. I'll just take the speeding ticket and go on my way."

"Please step out of the car."

Cami's face flashes in my mind and I remember my whole purpose for racing back to Apple Creek. "Please, I'm trying to get somewhere. It's why I was speeding. I apologize for arguing with you."

His hand drops to rest on the butt of his firearm. “Sir, I’m not going to ask you a fourth time. Right now you’re in violation of refusing the direct order of a peace officer. Step out of the car.”

I sigh, then move to comply. I get out of the car. “Look, again, I apologize, I was out of line.”

“Place your hands on the car, please, and do not move them unless directed.”

The cop on the other side of the car peers inside. “Hey, Nick, do you see what I see in the cupholder?”

The officer standing in front of me makes a show of looking in the car. “Sure do, Russ.” I also turn to look, but I don’t see anything out of the ordinary. “Sir, your phone is sitting in the cupholder. Were you texting or using the internet while driving?”

I hesitate. “I...don’t recall.”

The officer - “Nick” - frowns. “Sir, did you know that just holding your phone while driving is against the law in the state of Indiana? If I look in your phone’s history, will I see that you have used it?”

My back straightens as I look between them. “What’s going on here?”

“Please put your hands back on the car and answer the question, sir.”

“I don’t think I have to answer that question,” I say. “And no, you cannot look at my phone’s history.”

Nick makes a low humming sound of disapproval while the other officer - “Russ” - clucks his tongue.

“Sounds like we’ve caught ourselves a smart one, Russ.” The other one—“Russ”—chuckles.

“Look, guys—officers—I’ve obviously pissed you off and I’ve admitted I was out of line. Just give me the ticket and we can both be on our way without anything further needing to happen.” Like me suing them for harassment.

“Did you hear that, Nick?” Russ says. “That sounds like a threat.”

“It wasn’t a threat,” I say. “Can we all just take a moment?”

Nick leans over. “You won’t believe this, Russ, but I think I smell alcohol on his breath. Can you confirm this?”

“What?” I exclaim, standing up again. “That’s preposterous. Now this has gone far enough—”

“I smell it, too,” Russ says. “I’d say you’re right,”

“Sir, I’m going to need to conduct a field sobriety test,” Nick says to me. This time I would swear on a stack of Bibles his lips twitched upwards in an evil grin.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” I say. “I haven’t been drinking. I’m not drunk.”

“I’m going to have you walk heel-to-toe in a line, sir. As you do, say the alphabet in reverse, but only every third letter.”

“What? That can’t possibly be an approved test.”

“Are you refusing the test, sir?” Russ drawls, leaning against my car although he has all the time in the world. “If so, we will have to confiscate your license and escort you to the station for a blood draw.”

“No, I’m not refusing,” I say tightly. “But I’ll be filing a complaint.”

“I’ll be happy to give you the paperwork,” Nick says with a smirk. “Now start walking.”

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Twenty minutes later, I’ve walked in a line, hopped on one foot, touched my toes, danced the Macarena, recited the alphabet forwards and backwards, and sung Mary Had A Little Lamb. Twice.

Russ and Nick confer before Nick comes back over to me. I’ve already decided he’s the one I dislike the most. “I’m sorry to inform you that you’ve failed the test,” he tells me.

“Big surprise,” I scoff.

“We’ll be taking your license and escorting you to the station. Please get into the back of the cruiser.”

“You can’t do this,” I say, my patience finally at an end. “Do you know who I am?”

Nick pulls off his aviators and gives me the coldest stare of my life. “I know exactly who you are.”

“Well, then, this is police harassment and I’ll be filing a complaint against both of you, not to mention publishing an article on abuse of police power.” Levi will have a field day with this one, overreach of government authority being his favorite soapbox to stand on.

“Do you know who *I* am?” he asks.

I don’t even pause to consider his question. “I sure do, *Nick*.”

He taps the badge on his chest. “My name to you is Officer *Moreno*.” He pauses for a second to let that sink in. “Cami’s my cousin.”

I stare at him, slack-jawed. I’m in even bigger trouble than I had thought.

*Cami*

My car's tires squeal as I pull into the Apple Creek Police Department parking lot. I clamber out of my car and head for the door before realizing I left my keys in the ignition and the car's still running. I run back to get them. By the time I make it back to the door, my cousin is standing in front of it like a giant roadblock.

"What have you done?" I demand, poking a finger in his chest. He may be over a foot taller than me and have more muscles than the Hulk, but I used to beat him wrestling in the sandbox and I never let either of us forget it.

Nick chuckles. "You have got to see the video from my dash cam. It's pure gold. We practically had him doing the Hokey Pokey on the side of the road."

I let myself feel only a moment's amusement at that mental image before I decide to be an adult. "What were you thinking? A video? You'd better delete it before it gets out."

"Why? I was thinking about posting it on YouTube, maybe submitting it to America's Funniest Home Videos." He grins, the big dummy.

I groan. "Delete it right now. Because you know who won't find it funny if it gets out into the public? Mayor Caroline Wickers. And her first call will be to your boss, who will have to discipline you, if not fire you. And you know who else won't be amused? Your girlfriend, the journalist, who writes about issues like police and community relations. I doubt she'll be thrilled if her next assignment is writing about you."

His smile slips. "You really know how to take the fun out of things. I would have thought you'd be happy to see him get a little taste of his own humiliation."

His words burn a little, maybe because they hit too close to home. "Of course not," I say. "I barely know him." It's only a teensy lie.

He snorts. “Right. We all know about your date the two of you had.”

“What? How? I swear, Linda really needs—”

He rolls his eyes. “Not Linda. Patty works at the restaurant and she couldn’t keep her lips shut if they were superglued. She couldn’t wait to tell people after that article came out.”

I want to scream. “Can’t people in this town mind their own business?”

“No,” he says, like I just said something incredibly stupid.

I sigh. “Well, it doesn’t matter.”

He sticks out his chin a bit. “Of course it matters. You’re family.”

I half laugh, half groan, and hug him. “I love you, you big dummy.”

He hugs me back. “You say the word and he’s going to be spending a real uncomfortable night in our holding cell.”

I push him away. “Argh, no, that’s illegal. Just take me to him.”

He laughs as he opens the door to the station and leads me inside. We pass the front desk, which just has the booking officer, Charlie, since the station is on weekend light duty shift. I wave to him and he gives me a bored look over his reading glasses as he returns to his newspaper. Apple Creek is not exactly a hopping crime haven.

Nick leads me back to one of the interview rooms. He opens the door and I see Sam sitting inside, looking distinctly pissed off, and Russ sitting opposite him, arms crossed, glaring at him.

Sam turns to see me and his expression instantly shifts. My heart does a stutter-step at the look in his eyes and I inwardly curse. I’m not here to make heart-eyes at him. After what he did, I should be completely immune to him. *Snake, snake, snake*, I chant in my head. Sam scrambles to his feet.

“Sit down,” Russ commands.



“Let him go,” I say, turning to Nick. “He hasn’t committed a crime. You can’t hold him here.”

“Are you a lawyer now?” Nick asks me. “Let’s see, we clocked him driving more than twenty miles per hour over the speed limit. He was using his phone while driving. And I caught a whiff of alcohol on his breath, so we took him in for his own safety.” He counts Sam’s supposed crimes off on his fingers.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” I exclaim. “What a load of crock. He was with me the entire night. There was no drinking. Unless he randomly stopped along the way to do a shot, there’s no way he had alcohol on his breath, and it sounds like he was in a hurry to get here.”

Nick opens his mouth for a retort, but Sam speaks first. “I was racing to find you,” he says, his eyes locked on me. “I wanted to talk to you, to explain.”

My heart squeezes in my chest. I cross my arms. “I’m not here to talk to you. I’m just here to get you out before these two knuckleheads do something they end up regretting.”

“Please, Cami, I just want to explain,” Sam says at the same time as Nick scoffs, “Regret, my rear,” and Russ growls something under his breath.

I clap my hands over my ears. “Stop it, all of you.” Thankfully, despite the level of testosterone and metaphorical chest pounding in the small room, they listen. I drop my hands. “He wasn’t drinking, Nick. So unless you have reason to believe otherwise—and I mean evidence—you need to give him a fine for the other issues and let him go. Or else I’m reporting you to Caroline and you know she won’t look the other way.”

Nick grumbles, but nods. Sam looks from him to me, then sits down, crossing his arms.

“What are you doing?” I ask Sam, already not liking his expression. “You’re about to be released.”

He shakes his head. “Not before you give me a chance to explain.”

I sigh. Men. When would they stop being so pigheaded? “Can we do this somewhere else?” I ask, gesturing around at the sterile interview room.

“I would love to, but I already know the minute we walk outside, you’re liable to disappear and avoid me for the next six months. It’s already happened once.”

I blush. “Well, fine, suit yourself. You can just stay here, then.” I turn to leave.

“I guess I’ll be the one to make the phone call to Mayor Wickers about your cousin here,” Sam says behind me. “And my boss. Not to mention the story I’ll be writing for publication.”

I turn to stare at him, flabbergasted at his smug expression.

“What? Are you seriously threatening me right now?” Nick demands, his hands fisting as he stalks toward Sam like he’s about to pound him straight through the floor.

“Wait!” I say, stepping between them and putting my hand up to Nick’s chest, feeling a bit like a hamster trying to hold back a hurricane. “Just calm down. He’s just saying that to get me to talk to him.”

“Sounds like blackmail to me,” Nick growls. “But then he’s known for that.”

Can’t really disagree with him there. “It’s fine,” I tell Nick. “I’ll just talk to him for a couple minutes and then we’ll leave, okay?”

Nick gives me a small nod, then leans against the wall, muscled arms crossed as he gives Sam a death stare.

I roll my eyes, then turn to Sam expectantly.

“The meatheads need to leave,” Sam says, gesturing at Nick and Russ.

“Not a chance, buddy,” Nick says.

“Please, Nick,” I say, tilting my head toward the door. “Five minutes.”

Nick is silent for several long seconds. Then he pushes off the wall. “Fine, but I’ll be right outside. If he tries anything funny, you just give a shout, and I’ll be back.” He gives Sam one last look for emphasis and then he and Russ exit.

Sam’s eyes turn to me. I struggle to contain my sudden nerves as the room inexplicably feels smaller all of a sudden. “If you think this little episode put me in a forgiving mood, you’re gravely mistaken,” I tell him.

“I just want to talk,” Sam says.

I sit down in the chair opposite him. “So, talk.”

*Stay strong, I urge my heart. Stay strong.*

*Sam*

Sitting across the scratched table from Cami, her big brown eyes staring at me, words almost fail me. I want so badly to go back to last night, when she laughed, when she invited me into the bed, when she seemed willing to forgive and forget. Now she looks at me like a stranger. What can I say to explain, to make her understand?

“Let me just start by saying I’m sorry,” I say. “Truly, truly sorry. I submitted that article before I even left the party. It had nothing to do with you.”

She just watches me with an unblinking gaze.

I clear my throat and plow ahead. “I know seeing that article might have hurt you, maybe even made you think I had lied to you, and I never intended that. I didn’t lie to you. I would never lie to you.”

Still no response from her. I have so much more to say to her that the words crowd my chest, yet her blank expression keeps them locked inside.

“Cami, please,” I say, reaching across the table to stretch out my hand toward her. “Will you give me another chance?”

She doesn’t take my hand. “Is that it?” she asks.

I frown. “Is what it?”

“Is that all you wanted to say?” Her expression is cold enough to freeze fire.

“I guess so,” I say, confused.

“Okay.” The legs of her chair scrape against the floor as she scoots back before standing. “Then we’re done here. Let’s go.”

I stand, knocking back my chair, which lands with a clatter on the floor. “What? That’s all you have to say to me?”

“What else is there?”

“I don’t know. Yell at me, scream at me, I don’t care. Just tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking that I’m tired and I want to go home. Happy?”

“No! I know that’s not all you’re thinking. If you won’t tell me, how can we get past it?”

“We won’t get past this. I won’t.”

“Why?”

“Because it won’t change anything.”

“I can’t take down the article—”

“I don’t mean that,” she says. “I mean it won’t change you. I’ve heard all this from you before, remember? It’s the same song and dance. I heard it last night, even. And I *believed* you. Only to watch the exact same thing happen that happened six months ago. The exact same thing.” She emphasizes each word. “What’s that saying about the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing and expecting a different result?” She shakes her head and turns toward the door.

“Wait! I can totally understand how you would feel that way, and you have every right to feel that way,” I say. “But I’m telling you that it’s different this time.”

“How?” she demands.

I take a deep breath. “Last night, I realized something—I realized that I care about you. I’ve always cared about you. You are an amazing, smart, gorgeous woman. I ruined my chances with you six months ago and I’ve always regretted it. You mean more to me than any newspaper article. If I could go back in time and not send the article, I would.”

“Well, bully for you,” Cami snaps. She sniffs, swiping at her eyes that are shining brightly under the fluorescent lights. “It’s so easy for you to say this now, because you can’t go back in time, can you? So how would I ever know that it’s true?”

“It is true,” I insist. “Please give me another chance.”

She shakes her head. “I’ve given you enough chances. You said close to the same thing last time, yet here we are. Another vicious article published by you about a person I care about, another private apology. You talked a lot about truth and honesty and integrity last night, but it all feels like a bunch of crock. What you care about—what you’ve always cared about—is publishing whatever will get you the most attention.”

Her words twist my heart like she’s slowly strangling it. I don’t know what to say, because she’s right. Levi said something similar. As much as I hate to admit it, maybe that was what I cared most about before. But it’s not true now.

“I want to believe you,” Cami continues, swiping again at her eyes. “I really do. Because no matter how much I want to stop caring about you, I stupidly can’t seem to stop.”

I step toward her, wanting to embrace her, her words giving me my only hope. “Cami, I—I think I love you.”

Cami backs away from me, shaking her head, holding up a hand to keep me away. “No, you don’t. You love fame, and publicity, and having your byline on a juicy article. Everyone else is just cannon fodder to you.”

“That’s not true.”

She continues backing away, her hand reaching for the door handle. “I’m not the kind of girl who lets herself be used as a punching bag, who just keeps coming back for more. I’m smarter than that. So, I’m walking away, Sam. And I don’t want you to follow me.”

She turns and leaves, practically running out of the room.

“Cami, wait,” I call after her, trying to catch up.

“Not so fast, lover boy,” Nick says as he steps in my path, murder in his eyes. “I’d say she’s done talking to you. And you have some fines to settle before you can leave here.”

My eyes follow her retreating figure as she flees the station lobby. She gets in her car and, tires spinning, peels out of the parking lot.

I turn to follow Nick, not even caring if he throws me into the holding cell. My heart has already left the building.

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Ten minutes later, Nick finally lets me leave, holding two official tickets and a receipt for payment. I don't even care about the cost. All I can think about is Cami.

*I told her I loved her. And she ran.*

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I look down to see that I've missed a number of calls and voicemails, mostly from Levi. I immediately call him.

"Sam, where have you been?" Levi barks through the phone.

"At the police station," I respond numbly.

"Why? Never mind, no time. I was right that the story would get picked up by state news. The Indianapolis stations want to interview you. I need you to get ready for going on air. I'll help you with the talking points. This is a big deal for you —"

Levi keeps talking but I can barely hear him, the adrenaline racing through my veins causing a rushing sound in my eardrums. *This is it. This is what I've waited my whole career for. This could be my big break.*

Getting this level of attention could level up my career from Apple Creek Caller, circulation one thousand and dropping, to one of the bigger papers. All I have to do is put on my best on-air persona, which I may or may not have been practicing since I was ten.

"—Mayor Wickers—"

"What?" I ask, finally snapping back to paying attention to what Levi's saying.

"Mayor Wickers will be there, too," Levi repeats slowly. "Are you okay? Do I have to worry about you? You've been acting strange all morning."

“I’m fine,” I say, even though I am *not* fine. My heart drops to my feet as I think about Cami. I just told her I would take back the article if I could, and now here I will be on television promoting it. Everything she said about me will be proven right. *I can’t let that happen.*

“You better be,” Levi says. “I expect to see you shine and make me proud.”

“Yes, sir,” I say on autopilot as my mind races. I hang up with Levi and head for my car, only to remember it was still on the side of the highway due to Nick and Russ.

Cursing under my breath, I call a friend to give me a lift. Time is ticking and I have to decide what I’m going to do.



*Cami*

“The red dress, for sure,” I say. “It will make a statement on television.”

“Are you sure? I was really thinking the blue dress.” Standing in front of me in nothing more than her shapewear and bra, her hair in large foam rollers, not a lick of makeup on her face, is none other than Apple Creek’s very own Right Honorable Mayor, Caroline Wickers. It is definitely not a look most of her constituents get to see.

We’re standing in her bedroom. Clothes are strewn wildly over the bed, jewelry tumbles across her vanity, and there are enough shoes for an army of business-professional models to stomp down the runway.

“Well, which one are you going to feel most confident in?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” Caroline says, chewing on her lower lip. “Maybe I should pull out the purple one?”

I look at my watch. “We only have an hour. I think we just need to pick one or else you’ll be showing up to the interview in your bra.”

“Let’s ask Jason,” Caroline says. She turns her head and belts out his name loud enough to make me cover my ears.

A familiar crew-cut blond head and body appear in the doorway as Captain Jason Masterson makes an appearance. His bright blue eyes take in his fiance’s half-naked form with undisguised interest. *Blue eyes not unlike a certain someone’s—* no, I will not think about him. I need to focus on Caroline.

“Help me pick a dress,” Caroline is saying to Jason. She holds up both the red and the blue options for his inspection.

“Both options are lovely,” Jason says diplomatically. “Is this for your interview tonight?”

“Yes,” Caroline says.

“Then whichever one shows less cleavage is the one I like,” Jason says with a grin. “The other one you can save just for me.”

Caroline rolls her eyes but a tell-tale blush gives away how much she likes it.

I try to disappear into the background as he pulls her into his arms and she playfully tries to push him away. Even though they’ve been together for months, they act freshly in love. Usually it makes me uncomfortable, but this time I just feel wistful as the handsome police captain takes my boss in his arms. I imagine she feels just like I did last night when I was wrapped—*no, I am not thinking about him.*

“Earth to Cami,” Caroline says.

My eyes snap back to them and I realize they’re both staring at me. I blink. “I’m sorry, did you ask me something?”

“Everything okay?” Caroline asks.

“Yes, of course.”

She eyes me doubtfully, then continues, “I decided to take your advice and wear the red dress.”

“Why are you taking her advice over mine?” Jason mock-growls.

“Because she knows something about fashion beyond uniforms and ripped T-shirts,” she says, pointing at his chest, which does happen to be covered in a faded T-shirt. “Now get out of here so I can get ready.”

She shoos him away then turns her back as she shimmies into the dress. “Alright, tell me the talking points.”

I look down at my notebook I’m carrying. *Focus, Cami, focus.* “You are working with Caldwell Enterprises as part of your Main Street redevelopment plan, which was a campaign promise. You hope to bring new jobs to Apple Creek.”

“Got it,” she says as she zips up her dress. She eyes herself critically in the mirror. “What else?”

“Caldwell Enterprises is just one of several businesses you are courting to bring to Apple Creek through tax incentives.”

“Sounds like kickbacks,” Caroline says as she takes the rollers out of her hair and starts to brush it.

I cross out some words. “Okay...it’s one of several you are working to bring to Apple Creek to...increase the local tax base without raising taxes?”

“Too technical.” Her eyes meet mine in the mirror. “Are you sure you’re okay? You just seem...off.”

*Sam Perkins, your—and therefore my—mortal adversary, whom we both have described as Satan’s spawn and more disgusting than the gum on the bottom of a shoe, told me he loves me.* I shake my head. “I’m fine.”

She turns around to face me. “You don’t have to do this, Cami. I know you and he had a...flirtation a few months ago and then you ran into him last night.”

I flush. I don’t even want to tell her I stayed the night in the same room with him. She’ll think I slept with the enemy. Which is kind of factually true.

Caroline pauses. “I just don’t want to put you in an awkward position. You don’t have to come with me.”

And this is why I love her and believe in her. Caroline Wickers would always put others’ needs before her own. She has always been there for me. I am not about to let her face a crisis on her own.

“I’m going,” I say.

“Me too,” Jason says from the other room, clearly eavesdropping.

Caroline looks from me to the door, then smiles. “Well, then I guess I better finish getting ready for battle.”

I nod, even as my insides twist. Tonight’s interview will be a bloody, take-no-prisoners, all-out war between Caroline and Sam. And as much as I want to hide at home, I know I’m going not just to support Caroline, but to watch Sam do what he does best: be a conniving, manipulative snake. I need to see

it with my own eyes. No more opportunities for Sam to later try to explain away his actions and re-cast them in fancy value statements.

Maybe then I will stop thinking about him and can finally bury six feet deep the longing that I feel whenever I think about him.

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We arrive at the studio with minutes to spare. Caroline does a quick makeup check and runs through her talking points again with me. I only half-listen, my senses attuned for Sam's presence.

Then I see him, and it's like all the noise and lights fade into the background. He's sitting up on the stage, already seated at the desk with the television journalist. He's wearing a perfectly tailored, dark blue blazer over a crisp white shirt and pressed khakis. With his dark rimmed glasses and artfully tousled hair, he looks every inch the stylized reporter. Just looking at him makes my heart feel as though a fist were wrapped around it.

He turns his head and our eyes connect. I can't breathe. All I can think about is that three hours ago, this man had been within an arms-length of me, telling me he loves me. Now, sitting up in the bright television lights, he could not feel more distant.

As though to emphasize that point, Sam breaks the eye contact to start typing on his phone. I am not even worth a wave. I turn, blindly looking for a way to escape.

Then my phone buzzes. Happy for the distraction, I pull it out. The message is from Sam. With a shaking finger, I swipe it open.

Sam: You look beautiful tonight.

I wheel around to stare at him, only to find his eyes already on me. He starts tapping the phone screen again. My phone buzzes.

Sam: But you looked most beautiful in my arms last night.

I flush, guiltily looking over my shoulder as though anyone looking at me could see the words flashing over my head. I start typing.

Cami: Stop it. You're about to go on television to trash the person who is my boss, mentor, and one of my closest friends.

Sam's head snaps up to look at me again. Then he types. I can hardly stand the anxiety, waiting for his next message.

Sam: What if I wasn't?

Cami: What if you weren't what?

Sam: About to trash her.

I drag my eyes away from my phone to look at him, and his solemn, steady expression makes my heart beat more rapidly. He means it. Still...

Cami: I don't believe you.

Sam: Trust me.

Cami: I don't.

Sam: Then watch.

At that moment, Caroline walks up to the stage and Sam puts down his phone to shake her hand. I can't hear what she says to him, but judging by the compression of his lips to a thin, flat line, it wasn't good.

Then the lights in the studio dim and just the stage is lit. It's show time. All I can do is pray.

*Sam*

“Welcome to Your Turn, our show where we take on current issues and opposing viewpoints,” the anchor says in a clear, practiced tone. “I’m your host, Eleanor Cummings, and tonight I have with me two guests from America’s heartland. Sam Perkins, a reporter with the Apple Creek Caller, published an article today that has caused deep rifts in the small community. At its heart are the economic policies and campaign tactics of the progressive new mayor, Caroline Wickers, who is also here with us.”

I keep my eyes on the speaker, even as I take it all in. The stage, the cameras, the electric feeling of being *on-air*. For so many years, this had been my dream. Now I’m finally here, on the precipice of my career really taking off.

I had received messages of support and congratulations all day—from Levi, from friends and former colleagues, my family, anyone who had seen my byline and wanted to offer appreciation for exposing the gritty underbelly of small-town politics. Everyone knows how important this is to me.

Now I’m finally sitting in the seat on stage, next to a celebrity journalist, with cameras rolling. What I say here will be broadcast to thousands of viewers. It’s a heady feeling.

The bright lights of the studio make it hard to see beyond the stage, but I know Cami is standing in the crowd, watching us.

“Sam, let’s start with you,” Eleanor says. “Briefly tell the audience about the article you published.”

I clear my throat. The weight of the moment presses on me. “The article was regarding a campaign fundraiser hosted last night by Theodore Caldwell, billionaire financier, at his home in rural Indiana. City council is about to approve a tax incentive for Caldwell Enterprises to move their headquarters to Apple Creek. The article—my article—alleged that it was basically a pay to play. She gives his company a tax break, he funds her campaign.”

Eleanor's eyebrows rise. "That's a big allegation." She turns to Mayor Wickers. "Mayor Wickers, it's your turn. Would you like to respond to Sam's allegations?"

"Thank you, Eleanor, and yes, I would." Caroline's expression is pleasant, controlled, but I know it hides a seething hatred for me. Right before she had sat down at the table, she had come over to shake my hand. With a smile on her face, she had warned me to leave her chief of staff alone or she would personally see that my career was ruined.

I can respect the fact that she wants to protect Cami—I can even appreciate it for Cami's sake—but the fact that she thinks for a second that Cami has to be protected from *me* is repugnant. It makes me wonder what Cami has told her.

"I'm working with Caldwell Enterprises as part of my Main Street redevelopment plan," Caroline says. "My constituents have been very clear: Apple Creek needs jobs. My success as a mayor will be judged in many ways by the business that I can bring to our town. The tax incentive is part of fulfilling that campaign promise and has nothing to do with campaign fundraising."

"But the timing does seem suspicious," Eleanor says, digging in. "Apple Creek City Council is about to vote on the tax break, and almost on the eve of it, there's a big fundraiser at the billionaire's private home, which you and several members of city council attended."

Caroline's mouth turns down slightly, a crack in her oh-so-pleasant facade that indicates that Eleanor is getting to her. "The timing could have been better," she admits. "But the two events still don't have anything to do with each other. As I said, I've been planning this revitalization effort since I won the election and have been in talks with Caldwell Enterprises shortly after."

Eleanor nods. She turns to look at me, her perfectly coiffed hair barely moving an inch. "Back to you, Sam. You also made the point in the article that the billionaire is receiving preferential treatment as his business is receiving tax breaks that local small business owners aren't."

I try to keep the wince off my face. I had promised Cami I wouldn't trash Caroline, and yet Eleanor is digging up every point like she has a personal vendetta against the mayor. Which, judging from the arch looks she's been throwing the mayor's way, maybe she does.

The whole inanity of political theater strikes me at the moment. I had always imagined being on this stage to be *my* moment, *my* stepping stone to career success. But instead, I'm just a pawn in other people's games. None of it matters. All that matters is Cami.

I clear my throat. "I did point that out in the article, but to be fair, it's no different from state and federal tax breaks that give preference to larger employers."

Eleanor frowns at me as though disappointed I didn't jump on her attack bandwagon. Then she turns to Caroline to press further. "Another campaign promise you made was to those same small business owners. Have you left them behind in pursuing larger pockets?"

"Absolutely not," Caroline says. "We offer a number of benefits for small business owners, including both tax breaks and interest-free loans."

Eleanor continues her attack. "And what about Mr. Perkins' insinuation that your plan is to pander after any large businesses that will fund your campaign, which will eventually drive out the local businesses?"

Caroline's eyes widen and her face flushes. "That is complete, unsubstantiated rubbish."

"Well, Mr. Perkins, it sounds like Mayor Wickers is making her own accusation," Eleanor says as she turns back to me. Her face never changes but I can practically hear her cackle as she stirs the proverbial pot. "She says that your article is unsubstantiated rubbish. Is it?"

This is my chance, my opportunity to speak up. I clear my throat. "Let me say on the record that I support Mayor Wickers' endeavors to attract business to the town. I believe her when she says that she has the town's best interests at



heart, including the small business owners. If my article made any other insinuation, that is an inaccurate representation.”

Eleanor’s eyes flare and it feels as though I’ve waved a red flag in the path of a raging bull. “Are you saying that your article did not accurately represent the issue?”

My heart seizes. I have fought my whole career for journalistic integrity, even put my career on the line and lost a job that I loved over doing what I felt was right. I had sacrificed my first chance with Cami on the altar of it. And what hurts the most about this moment? That there is a kernel of truth to it. Despite everything I had said to Cami, if I look back on the article truthfully, I *had* stretched the facts a bit to make my case stronger against Mayor Wickers. Because I had known it would get the most attention and readers.

“Well, Mr. Perkins?” Eleanor asks.

As much as I want to, I can’t back out now. I had made a promise to Cami. And equally important, I had made a promise to myself to never misrepresent the truth. Even when it hurts. “I may have written the article with a level of bias that caused me to misrepresent the facts.”

“And so you do not have any proof of Mayor Wickers trading tax incentives for campaign contributions?”

“No.”

Eleanor turns to face forward, smiling brightly. “And there you have it, folks. In a turn of events, we have exposed not the mayor’s unethical conduct, but a reporter’s. It’s always exciting on Your Turn, so make sure you tune in. See you next week.”

As soon as the lights in the studio come back on and the cameras stop rolling, Eleanor rips off her headpiece and snarls at me, “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but I don’t believe you for a second. I don’t know what she said or did, but I didn’t realize I was hosting the mayor’s PR department. Tell Levi not to call me for a favor again.” She storms off the stage.

I run a shaky hand through my hair. So much for my fifteen seconds of fame.

“Thank you.”

I look up to see Caroline looking at me, her expression thoughtful. “I didn’t do it for you.”

“I know. But thank you all the same.”

I nod, still processing what I’ve done. After Eleanor calls Levi and complains, I might not have any career in journalism at all.

Footsteps rapidly approach. I turn to see Cami and some of my tension melts away because she’s smiling at me. A real smile. One that lights up her whole face.

“I’ll give you two a moment,” Caroline says. I barely notice her leaving from the corner of my eye, because all my attention is on Cami.

“You did it,” Cami says. “That lady was spoiling for a fight and you didn’t take her bait.”

“I told you I wouldn’t.”

“I know,” she says. “But I didn’t believe you.”

“Do you believe me now?”

She drops her gaze and my heart squeezes. Was all of this for nothing? She finally looks back at me. “Not one hundred percent, not completely, no. But it’s a start.”

I understand. It’s not everything, but it’s not nothing. “I’ll take that start. How about I also take you to dinner tonight?”

She nods, a smile lighting up her whole face. “Okay. Deal.”

I grin. “How about a kiss to seal the deal?”

“Don’t push your luck, mister,” she says, her lips quirking into a small smile.

“I had to try,” I say with a shrug, winking at her.

Her smile broadens. “But *maybe* if the date is really good, you’ll get that kiss.”

*A-ha!* “Challenge accepted.”

She laughs, then, and it’s a beautiful sound. I grab her hand as we walk from the soundstage and for this moment, it’s enough.

## Epilogue

*Six months later...*

*Cami*

“Did you have to invite him as your plus one?” Caroline asks. She examines herself in the full length mirror. Dressed in a gorgeous, lace-covered, figure-hugging, mermaid-style wedding dress with a train for days, Caroline is a breathtaking bride. Which is a surprise to no one.

“C’mon,” I say, “you’ve been warming up to him...right?” I stand next to her in my pale pink maid of honor dress. It’s a flattering empire waist design with lace to match her gown, but there’s no chance of outshining the bride.

“Just make sure he knows that being invited to my wedding doesn’t mean he can start interrogating my guests,” Caroline says.

I roll my eyes. “He knows that.” I think. Sometimes Sam can’t help himself.

It’s been six months since the television interview and Sam and I have been slowly testing the relationship waters. It hasn’t always been easy. Sam was able to convince Levi that his public support for the mayor was a good counterbalance to Levi’s right-wing tendencies, and Levi agreed to keep him on, but only if Sam made sure to keep his biases in check—a laugh coming from Levi, of all people. But Sam has made good on his promise, even if sometimes that means publishing articles that I would prefer he didn’t.

Still, we’ve slowly built trust between us. I believe him when he says that he’s not intentionally trying to slander Caroline, and he doesn’t use our relationship—and my connection to Caroline—to dig up dirt. For the most part, we don’t talk about work and just have fun.

“And no gotcha headlines,” Caroline adds.

“He knows that, too.”

“And no pictures.”

“Everyone’s taking pictures, Caroline.”

“But I want to approve any that are going to end up on the front page of the Apple Creek Caller.”

“Levi agreed to that, remember?” I try to reassure her.

“But I don’t trust him.”

“Caroline,” I say firmly, “today is your wedding day. I think you have bigger things to worry about than what my boyfriend will be publishing on the Apple Creek Caller.”

She frowns. “You say that now, until there’s a photo of me with a wardrobe malfunction on the front cover.”

I shake my head. “It will be fine, stop worrying. Think instead about the handsome groom who will be waiting for you with the priest.”

Caroline grins, then. “He is pretty handsome, isn’t he?”

I frown. “I would feel weird confirming or denying that statement, so I’m going to stick with total neutrality.”

“Smart choice,” she says. “But he *is* handsome.”

The joy on her face makes me happy. She deserves all the love in the world. She works long, hard hours and gives her all to be the very best mayor Apple Creek has ever had, even if no one ever gives her credit for it.

There’s a knock on the door. “It’s time,” I tell Caroline. “I’m going to head out. Take deep breaths.”

She smiles. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“You’d better be. I think Jason has the entire force here, so they’ll be out after you if you try to make a run for it.”

She laughs. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

I nod and leave the dressing room to head to the chapel. I wasn’t kidding; the entire police force, minus a skeleton crew, is at this wedding. If criminals were smart, now would be an opportune time for a spree.

From the back, I see all the people in the town I know and love—my cousin Nick and his girlfriend, V; my best friend

Linda and her boyfriend, Russ; all my friends and colleagues; and best of all, Sam. He sees me standing at the back, waiting for the music to start, and he leaves his seat to come toward me.

My heart starts the dance it always does when he approaches, a steadily increasing thump-thump as a smile involuntarily spreads across my face. He's handsome in his navy suit, tousled hair, and glasses. And he wears the same smile on his face that I have, and it's all for me.

"What are you doing?" I scold, even as I'm happy he's here. "We're about to head down the aisle."

"I know. But my girlfriend looks so beautiful, I have to steal a kiss." He pulls me to him and before I can protest that he's going to mess up my makeup, he presses a kiss to my mouth. I give up the fight pretty quickly, happy as ever to melt into him. He's handsome, he's smart, he's funny, and he's mine.

He pulls back from me, his hands raising to cup my face. "Think this will be us soon?"

I could dissolve into a puddle at this moment. My vision blurs with tears. "You want to marry me?"

"Of course I want to marry you," he says. "If I could grab the priest for a moment and slip him a twenty, I'd do it right now."

I laugh and push him away. "You have to ruin every sweet moment with a joke."

"Here, I'll start over," he says, pulling me back for another kiss.

I only give him a moment before pushing away again. "You're smearing my lipstick."

"Good. You're looking so pretty, I don't want any other guys out there getting any ideas." He smirks at me.

"Ugh, caveman," I say.

He looks like he's about to say something, but I hear my name called, so I shake my head at him and step away. "I have

to go. Get back to your seat.”

“Fine, but I expect the first dance. And the last dance. And all the dances in between.”

I laugh and blow him a kiss, then step into place next to my attending groomsman as Sam slips back into the chapel. As the music starts and we walk down the aisle, I could not be happier than I am in this moment, with these people, and most of all, with Sam.

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Thanks so much for reading! If you liked the story, please leave a rating or review! It helps other readers find the story!

Although this is the conclusion of this series, it's not the end of my sweet rom coms nor Apple Creek. As of this writing (April 2023), I'm wrapping up writing a sweet billionaire romance based at a cozy inn in Half Moon Bay (sneak peek to follow!) and then will get started on a summer travel rom com series! I'll return to Apple Creek with a Christmas series this fall – I can't wait!

If you want to stay up to date on all my news, follow my author Facebook page and [subscribe to my newsletter](#), where I'll share updates, sneak peeks, and book sales! Hope to see you there!

Now, on to the sneak peek of my next release, a sweet contemporary romance, *The Billionaire Innkeeper of Half Moon Bay!*

Jacob Bellamie stared out at the Seattle skyline from the glass and steel executive suite of his downtown skyscraper. The floor to ceiling windows gave him an uninhibited view of the Puget Sound, dotted with sailboats, ocean liners, and industrial machinery. On a clear day, Mount Rainier rose above him in all of her majestic, eerie beauty.

From this suite, Jacob had negotiated billion-dollar deals, gambling with millions like it was Monopoly money. Fortunes had risen and fallen, and he had personally shaped some of that very same skyline with construction projects that had spanned over a decade. Barely forty, he was still young by many standards, at the very pinnacle of his success, and yet he was about to give it all up.

He looked over the city he had helped build, and he felt like a stranger in his own land.

The intercom on his phone buzzed. His secretary, Tamara, spoke through the open line. "Richard is here to see you."

"Send him in," Jacob said without turning.

The door to his suite opened behind him and he could see the reflection of his best friend and second-in-command in the glass.

"It's not too late to back out now," Richard said.

Jacob laughed, finally turning to look at him. His friend stood in the center of the suite, wearing the same type of tailored suit that Jacob did and the same designer shoes, and yet Richard looked so much more like he belonged there than Jacob had ever felt he had. Richard had been born to a life of privilege, whereas Jacob only sojourned there.

Despite his friend's words, Jacob knew he would be ripping out Richard's heart if he changed his mind now. Richard had lived in Jacob's shadow for most of his adult life and he was finally getting the chance to step into the leadership position. The old king was dead, long live the king.



“No backing out. I’ve had a good run, made good money, and it’s time to pass it on. It’s your turn,” Jacob said. He didn’t mistake the way that his friend’s shoulders relaxed.

“Aren’t you going to miss it?” Richard asked, tucking his hands in his pockets.

“Miss it?” Jacob asked. He had loved everything about the knock-down fights of corporate America, the war of negotiations, the objective accomplishment of building structures that kissed the sky. He had lost friends, even lost a marriage, due to his single-minded love affair with his business. But it was time to step down. His daughter needed him to. “You know I’m keeping my hand in, just a little.”

Richard laughed. “Oh, I know. Looking over my shoulder.”

“No,” Jacob said, not wanting his friend to labor under that misperception. “Just to help.”

“Of course,” Richard said. “And I appreciate it.” With Richard’s blessing, Jacob was stepping down from CEO to a position on the board. But neither of them fooled themselves; Jacob’s opinion and voice would remain large. “When are you heading back?”

“Tomorrow.”

“How’s Ella taking it?”

Jacob huffed a laugh. “Well, let’s see, she’s a teenager who’s being removed from all of her friends and the only home she’s ever known to return to a small island community of less than two thousand people,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Taking it well, then,” Richard said with a laugh.

“Yeah, you could say that, if you didn’t take into account the nightly fits, tears, threats, and general melodrama.” Jacob had dealt with more teenage drama than he ever wanted to. He had heard teenage girls were rough, but he hadn’t taken the warnings seriously enough.

But Ella was the reason he was returning to his hometown of Half Moon Bay. All she seemed to care about was shopping, brand names, and status. Barely thirteen, she already was flirting with boys and pushing against every boundary. As a single dad, Jacob had always been proud that his daughter had never wanted for anything, but he was starting to wonder if she would have done better as he had, having to fight for his place in the world.

He wanted to bring her back to his family, almost all of whom had remained behind. It would do her good to know her grandmother and uncles better, and he knew it would make his mother happy. After the sudden loss of his father, it was time for him to step up as the family patriarch and make sure his mother was taken care of.

“It’s not like you’re moving across the country,” Richard said, still laughing at Ella’s antics. Here in the city, he had served as Ella’s adopted uncle, but the pushover kind, much to Jacob’s annoyance.

“Almost seems like it.” Only two and a half hours from Seattle, a person had to cross the Canadian border and then back into the United States to reach the peninsular community known as Half Moon Bay. Compared to the bright lights and skyscrapers of Seattle, the oceanside village may as well have been a world away.

“So, what’s the plan, then? Drinking margaritas and listening to Jimmy Buffett?”

“It’s on the tip of Canada, not the Caribbean,” Jacob laughed.

Richard shook his head. “I gotta say, I can’t really picture you kicking back in a seaside town and relaxing. The workaholic Bellamie I know wouldn’t be able to take more than two days of that. In fact, I can remember more than one so-called vacation that you ended up working through.”

“You know me too well,” Jacob said. “I might have a little renovation business project up my sleeve already.”

What Jacob didn't say was that he had always worked because he had never felt he could stop working without slipping backwards and losing all the forward progress he had made, and he feared he would one day wake up, back in the same quasi-poverty he had left. But that mantle of responsibility was no longer his and would rest on Richard's shoulders, so he would find out himself soon enough.

"I knew it! What is it?" Richard asked.

Jacob hesitated. The project was a far cry from the usual ones they ran. "There's a crumbling mansion on the tip of the peninsula, locally known as Ford's Folly. It used to be the home of a wealthy family who lost it in the dot-com bubble burst. It's been sitting vacant for twenty years."

"And you're going to live in it?" Richard asked, frowning.

Jacob cleared his throat. "In a manner of speaking. I'm going to turn it into a fully operational bed and breakfast. Ella and I will live in the guest house on the premises."

Richard stared at him like he had lost his ever-loving mind. "You're going to be an innkeeper?" He burst into laughter.

Jacob gave him a withering look. "It's always been my mother's dream to run a bed and breakfast. So I'll renovate it, get it up to code, then turn it over to my mother."

"And if she decides she doesn't want it?"

Jacob shrugged. "Then I'll sell it, hopefully at a profit. But in the meantime, it will be a little hobby, give me something to do."

"You're going to do it all yourself?"

"No, my brother's there now. He's been overseeing the property while I've been wrapping up things here. It will be a good project for the two of us." And it would keep Derrick out of trouble. Ever since coming back from the Army, Derrick hadn't been the same. This project would give them something to do together, and hopefully give Derrick a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

“Jacob Bellamie, local innkeeper,” Richard said, shaking his head. “Never would have imagined it.”

“Luckily, you won’t have to imagine it,” Jacob said. “Because you’re invited out for the grand opening in a week. I expect to see you there.”

“You got it. Just make sure Tamara has the details and I’ll be there.”

“Will do. And thanks for putting the final bow on the Parsons deal. I feel bad for leaving right before it’s almost complete.”

“It’s been dragging out for months. If you waited for that, it might never be done.”

“True.” Jacob clapped him on the back. “Alright, then. You ready for the next step?”

Richard nodded and the gleam in his eyes was unmistakable.

“Let’s go,” Jacob said. Together, they headed for the door, on the way to the boardroom where the board would officially accept Jacob’s resignation and vote Richard in as the CEO.

Jacob took one last look around the office, taking a moment to appreciate all that his success had brought him, before closing the door. It was time to move on, to focus on reconnecting with his family. The inn was just a means to that end. After a career of billion-dollar construction projects, how hard could one simple renovation be?