



States of Love

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A SPICY SMALL-TOWN ROMANCE FEATURING A
FEMALE FIREFIGHTER

STATES OF LOVE

ANN OMASTA

CALLIE LOVE

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Let's stay in touch...

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GRAHAM

I have always been calm, quiet, and perfectly content to live in the background, while my younger brother is the magnetic, rock star-type—literally. He's Gavin Timberbatch. Yes, the one who has stadiums full of screaming fans throwing their lacy skivvies onstage and hoping to shoot their shot with him.

Gavin has calmed down considerably in recent months and has even acquired a steady girlfriend, whom he seems to have fallen head over heels for, but that doesn't stop his top fans—the self-proclaimed Timberbitches—from going to extreme lengths to meet him.

I've even had a few of his most avid fans show up at my inn with the hope that I might be able to introduce them to Gavin. As much as I'd like to help out the starry-eyed women, I won't do anything to jeopardize my relationship with my kid brother. He and I don't have the greatest parents or a large family, so Gavin is everything to me.

Besides, these women must be raving lunatics to travel all the way to my tiny inn, The Charming Hideout, located in Charming Falls, Illinois. It's not like it's on the way to, well, anywhere. But the quaint hotel is all mine, and I couldn't be any prouder of it.

Gavin went through a rough patch with his fame with some false accusations that threatened to ruin his skyrocketing career, but he came through it like the champ that I know him to be.

Actually, the entire world knows he's a champ, thanks to his win on *USA Idol*. I've never been so proud as the night he was voted the winner of that televised, nationwide singing competition. And that was just the beginning for Gavin. His career exploded after that... until the sexual assault claims threatened to take it all away from him.

I never doubted my brother's innocence for a moment, but everyone else did. Well, everyone except his new love, Demi.

Demi stood by Gavin's side during that dreadful time in his life and proved that she truly cares about the real man behind the rock star.

The two lovebirds came here for a quick visit a couple of weeks ago, and I couldn't be happier for them. Gavin deserves that kind of all-consuming passion and love. We all do.

Gavin's career has slowed down a bit now, and he is taking things in a new direction. With his phenomenal level of talent, I have no doubt that he will be massively successful no matter how he chooses to perform.

Other than my brother, my biggest pride and joy is my inn. I have done everything at The Charming Hideout—from sanding and staining the wood floors, to hanging and painting the crown molding. There likely isn't a square inch in the entire place that hasn't been touched, cleaned, or detailed by me. That kind of handiwork to improve a place creates a deeply ingrained love that can't be bought.

Sure, it would be nice to have an easier career or a competent manager to run this place for me, but I can't give up on my hotel baby. It may not be a huge moneymaker, but it's mine, and I can't imagine anything I'd rather be doing.

My guests choose this inn for the architectural details and rustic charm. I take the time to get to know them and cater to their needs in a way that a chain hotel near the highway can't accomplish. The job may not be glamorous and sometimes it gets lonely, but it's my life, and I'm content.

Today, I use the midday lull between morning check-outs and evening check-ins to run errands. After stopping by the

local hardware store for more painting supplies to continue what seems to be the never-ending touchups from dings and scratches on the inn's walls, I head to the grocery store for cereal, peanut butter, frozen dinners, and Oreos—my main food groups.

After I load the grocery bags into the back of my trusty old Jeep, I notice Mrs. Swindell ambling out toward her car. The independent, opinionated woman has been a staple in Charming Falls for as long as anyone can remember.

I return my cart to the corral and jog over to greet the cranky, older woman. “It’s a beautiful, sunny day, isn’t it, Mrs. Swindell?”

“You came all the way over here just to blabber on about the weather?” she asks in a grouchy tone.

Unoffended, I lean down to say near her ear, “Actually, I rushed over here to flirt with a lovely woman, but I needed an excuse to speak to her.”

At first, she seems confused by my compliment as she looks around. When comprehension dawns that I was referring to her, she pats her chest before fluffing her silvery-blue pin curls. “Oh my... Yes, it’s a very nice day, Graham.”

As I reach over to push her cart for her, she immediately slips back into her grumpy tone as she snaps, “I can do it myself.”

“Oh, I know that you are a perfectly capable and independent lady,” I assure the woman, before adding, “But I would be honored to escort you to your car.”

“All right then,” she answers primly.

Once I load her few grocery bags into her ancient, white Cadillac and close the enormous trunk’s lid, she says, “It’s nice to see a young man from your unruly generation with actual manners.”

In all the years I’ve been trying to win the standoffish woman over, it’s the nicest thing she has ever said to me. I’m quite sure it’s the closest she can come to giving a genuine

compliment. Before I can thank her, the piercing sound of a siren draws our attention.

We both watch as the bright red fire truck heads toward the center of town.

After the noise fades, Mrs. Swindell scrunches up her face and says, “Looks like they’re going downtown to Main Street. I hope your little inn isn’t on fire.”

Even though she likely intended for her words to be kind, an incredibly ominous feeling settles in the pit of my stomach.

Suddenly, I know in my heart that something is terribly wrong. Unable to even say goodbye to Mrs. Swindell, I race to my Jeep.

MIRANDA

I am running through my safety checks when the loud siren blasts through the station. Cursing the timing of the alarm, I tell myself that time is of the essence. Even though I know I should just grab my gear and go, I'm also aware that if I don't perform the third check, it will be the only thing I can think about, until I get back here and finish.

It's dangerous, and quite possibly a bit reckless to take the time to do that third check. Telling myself it would be more perilous to be distracted on the job, I go through the ritual for the third time as quickly as I can.

My logical brain knows that my compulsion to do random things in multiples of three is ridiculous, but that doesn't make it any easier to control.

As the last member of my crew, Tucker, races out toward the trucks, he turns back to say, "Let's go, Wilson. This isn't a drill."

"Coming," I assure him, relieved that the gruff man didn't point out my quirk.

I'm not sure how many of my crew have noticed my OCD tendencies. They treat me just like one of the guys, so they probably would have openly teased me about it, if it was common knowledge. Nothing is off-limits when it comes to guys ribbing each other in the firehouse—even mild mental health disorders.

After rushing through my third check, I run to the truck. I'm the last one aboard, but no one comments on my slight

tardiness as I take my jump seat spot and we rush out of the station with sirens blaring.

When the truck begins to slow as we approach the address, I put on my helmet and tap it three times.

Tucker narrows his eyes in my direction, but refrains from commenting. Instead, his jaw clenches and his facial expression morphs into all-business mode as we pull to a stop.

Springing into action, I hop out of the truck, but my step falters. Flames are shooting out of the quaint inn on Main Street.

I've always had a soft spot in my heart for the inn's handsome owner, Graham, and this is probably going to devastate him. I can't know that for sure, since I'm not exactly close to the hardworking man, but I get the distinct sense that this place is his baby.

My heart pounds loudly in my ears as I work alongside my crew to control the intense blaze. The inn is already engulfed in flames and too far gone to save, but we need to get the fire stopped before the wind carries it to any of the other small businesses that line our town's center square.

As we work, my mind can't stop worrying about Graham. Hopefully, with the midday timing of the fire, no guests were injured, but it's quite possible that Graham was inside the building when the fire started. A quick scan of the gathered crowd tells me that he isn't standing here.

Our chief made the judgment call the moment we arrived at the site that the fire was already too far gone for any of us to enter and search the building. That left us to fight the flames from the outside and hope that no living souls were trapped inside.

"Please let Graham be safe." I whisper the words three times to God, our guardian angels, or whoever might be listening.

Breath whooshes out of my lungs when Graham runs up beside us. The devastated wail he lets out nearly breaks my heart, "No-ooo!"

I ache to pause and try to comfort him, but I make myself stay focused on the task at hand. What he needs from me right now is for us to get this fire stopped. It already looks like there won't be much of anything salvageable from the resulting rubble and ash, but every second this fire continues reduces the chance of us being able to save something.

After what seems like an eternity, we finally get the fire under control. The grueling work has left my entire team exhausted and covered in soot.

When I finally allow myself to take a quick break, I tear my gaze away from the smoldering remains of the inn and catch a glimpse of Graham. The grim, crushed expression pulling down his normally handsome features makes my throat burn even more than the hot, dry air.

Graham and I lock eyes for a long moment. I'm sure that he can see how much I care for him, even though my face must be coated in grime. Just as I'm working up the courage to approach him, Chief walks up and steals Graham's attention. For what feels like the 999th time between me and this man, the moment is lost.

GRAHAM

The road is blocked by fire trucks, police barricades, and groups of looky-loos. I park as close as I can to my beloved inn that serves as my home, business, and sole source of income. My burning eyes refuse to blink as I stare at the smoke rising into the air from the black shell of the building that used to be my everything.

I can't believe it's gone. All of those hours of hard work and close attention to every minute detail have gone up in smoke—literally. The inn that has been my life for the past few years is now nothing more than a pile of charred rubble.

Turning, I watch with glassy eyes as the brave fire crew works seamlessly together to contain and extinguish the fire, but the structure is already too far gone to limit the damage. I'll be surprised if anything from inside can be saved.

Nausea overtakes my system as I struggle to believe this is real.

I try to listen to the fire chief as he explains something to me, but my swirling mind isn't lucid enough to follow what he's saying. Evidently deciding that I'm not able to have a coherent discussion in this moment, the gruff man gives my back a firm smack before he stomps away.

When it dawns on me, I begin frantically sweeping my eyes back and forth. Hoping for help, I shout into the crowd, "Has anyone seen an orange tabby cat?"

Wide eyes stare back at me as a few people shake their heads back and forth to indicate they haven't seen the stray

that adopted me as his person a few months ago. I've never been much of a cat person, but this particular one insisted that I accept him into my life.

I balked at first—not wanting to deal with having a pet, but quickly realized that resistance was futile. Once a cat decides that you're going to be in each other's lives, it's practically impossible to keep from falling for the little furball.

“Nacho? Here kitty, kitty, kitty,” I try. When that doesn't work, I make the “Pss, pss, pss” sound with my mouth, which I use to call him in for dinner.

That sound has never before failed to bring the animal running to twirl around in between my legs, but this time, there isn't any sign of him. I try to remember if he was inside when I left for the grocery, but the cat comes and goes as he pleases through the kitty door, so I'm really not sure if he was in or out.

If he got trapped in the flames, I'll never get over it. It's bad enough to lose my home and business, but material objects can be replaced. Nacho was a living, breathing, one-of-a-kind friend to me.

He is one of a kind. I silently reprimand myself for using the past tense in my thoughts about the loving, feisty animal.

I grab the arm of a passing fireman. “Please, have you found an orange cat?”

“Nah, man. Sorry,” he answers, already shaking his arm loose to continue his trek to the rig.

“Nacho?” I call out again, silently praying that I'll hear him mewl.

Staring at the charred building, I try to decide if it would be of any use to search for the cat inside. I don't have a death wish, but if there is any chance of finding him alive, I'd be willing to risk it.

As if the firefighter can read my mind, he suddenly turns back. “Don't even think about entering the perimeter to search for your lost pet. It's not safe. Besides, if he's in there, he's already gone.”

The man's grim tone and stern warning make bile rise in my throat. It's all I can do to swallow it down past the burning lump that has lodged itself uncomfortably in my chest.

Suddenly, I see her. Miranda, the charming, attractive, and tough-as-nails female firefighter I've secretly had my eye on for years is heading in my direction. She's holding something in her arms. I blink and try to make out what it is, but the smoke makes my vision hazy.

When she gets close enough, I breathe out his name on a sigh of relief and run in their direction. "Nacho."

Miranda gives me a smile that doesn't reach her pretty eyes as she says, "This is one smart cat. He got out of there in time and was hiding in the bushes next door."

As she hands him to me, I say, "I'm so glad he wasn't inside."

"Me, too," she agrees as the cat clamors up my chest as if he can't get close enough to me.

We both chuckle at the animal's obvious relief to see me.

Miranda starts to turn away, but suddenly turns back and takes my hand within hers. "I'm sorry this happened, Graham. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"You're already doing it," I assure her, indicating her firefighting gear. "I'm just glad no one was hurt."

After nodding her agreement, she says, "In that case, I'd better get back to work."

I watch her walk away, admiring the view. The gorgeous woman makes even her bulky firefighting uniform work.

A pang of regret strikes as I stare at her. It's obvious by her flirtatious attempts to reach out that she would be open to a relationship with me. If things were different, I'd be delighted to start something romantic with her.

Unfortunately, my past mistakes make that impossible.

MIRANDA

A frustrated sigh emerges from deep in my chest as I stow my gear. I've attempted on multiple occasions to make it clear to Graham that I'm interested in him, but he never acts on my unsubtle hints.

When I handed his terrified cat to him earlier, I made sure our hands brushed during the transfer. That simple, light touch took my breath away. My gaze immediately darted to his. His eyes lit up for a brief moment, but then he quickly masked it, as if he wanted to pretend like he didn't notice the palpable electricity between us.

Granted, he's dealing with way more than anyone should ever have to right now, but I'd been hoping our eyes would lock in a shared moment of solitude. I can't imagine why he doesn't want to admit that we have an all-consuming, magnetic attraction, and having him deny it stings and brings with it a twinge of sadness.

Perhaps it's time for me to admit that he's simply never going to reciprocate my feelings and move on. Unfortunately, that's easier said than done. I've told myself for years that I should find someone else, but Graham is the only person in town who piques my interest. Too bad he's done nothing but friend-zone me since the day we met.

The few dates I've tried to go out on since moving to Charming Falls have been absolute disasters. Most men are intimidated by my job. Firefighters have to be tough, especially female ones. I've learned the hard way that, for the most part, men with office jobs prefer to think of themselves

as the big, strong hero to a damsel in distress, rather than admit they are dating a strong woman who can take care of herself.

Since I could never be in a relationship with someone on our crew—both out of safety concerns and the ick factor of them being like brothers to me—my viable options are severely limited.

For some reason, I get a vibe from Graham that he wouldn't be bothered by my job. He seems confident and secure enough in his masculinity to handle the traditional role reversal. Of course, I could be wrong about that, but I simply can't imagine him having a problem with me being the hero of our story—if we had a story together.

The mood is somber when we return to the station and unload the trucks. It's always a good day when no lives are lost, but it doesn't feel great to know we weren't able to stop the fire before irreparable damage was done.

“Nice work out there, Wilson,” Chief says as he stalks by me on the way to his office.

“Thank you, sir,” I answer, but he's already blown by me.

Those generic words are about as close to high praise as the gruff man ever gets, so I'll gladly take it. He seems to have a soft spot for me, as the only woman on his crew, but he's careful never to take it easy on me. Treating me differently wouldn't do either of us any favors. I want to earn my place here, and I work hard every day to prove my worth.

“Chief's little pet got a 'good job.' Why don't I ever get any compliments from the big guy?” Meyer whines.

Giving him an exasperated look, I quip, “You'd have to do something right for that to happen, Meyer.”

The other guys from our crew chuckle at the gentle ribbing as we stow our gear in our lockers. This is comfortable. It's how we operate. We razz each other and give each other a hard time, until it's time to work. Then we have each other's backs, like a family would.

Giving me a short break, Meyer turns to Briggs. “I saw that pretty cashier from down at the bakery watching me work the hose.”

Briggs shakes his head amiably, but doesn’t take the bait. We all know he’s been on a couple of dates with the curvy stunner, and things are starting to heat up between them. If she was checking out anyone as we fought the fire, it was definitely handsome, quiet Briggs, not obnoxious Meyer.

With that, we fall into our usual routine of bickering over who is going to make dinner and who will be stuck with cleanup duty.

Once we have that relatively settled, I head into my locker room to get cleaned up. The room isn’t much more than a bathroom and tiny dressing area, but it’s my space where I can be alone for a moment to process, without the guys underfoot.

I watch as the shower’s hot spray washes the black grime down the drain. Normally, I wash off quickly, so the guys don’t accuse me of using too much hot water, but right now, I need a few extra minutes of alone time. The steamy water beats down on my tight shoulders and releases some of the tension stored there.

As is usually the case, my thoughts drift back to Graham. Today, I have an excuse for him being top of mind. He just lost everything in that fire. I ache to reach out to comfort him, but I’m unsure if it would be a welcome gesture.

Even as I’m reminding myself that he clearly isn’t interested in pursuing a relationship with me, I’m already planning out in my mind what I’m going to say when I check on him.

GRAHAM

The front desk clerk at the rundown roadside motel by the highway clearly doesn't want to be at work. He checks me in and hands me a key card with barely more than a grunt in greeting.

After entering my grungy room, I can't do much more than shake my head in disgust. Talk about a lack of charm... This place is as unwelcoming as can be. I just hope I don't get bedbugs from my time here.

I've never really considered this fleabag motel to be my competition, even though they are the only other establishment that rents rooms within a fifteen-minute drive of Charming Falls. It's clear now that they offer nothing for me to worry about. My homey, quaint inn is on a completely different level than this barren shell of a building. Well, it used to be. I guess my inn isn't anything anymore.

I flop down on the scratchy, floral bed cover that looks like it is straight out of the 1970s, but not in a classic, vintage way. It's more like they haven't changed the dated décor in numerous decades, and they likely got it from the clearance bin back in the day.

A spring from the thin mattress gouges my back, so I twist around to find a comfortable position. I'm not sure how long I'll be able to suffer through staying here, but my options are severely limited at the moment.

Apparently, this is one of the problems with living where you work, along with never really having time off. I somehow

managed to put all of my eggs in one basket, and that basket burned to the ground.

At least the inn is insured, but it will likely take a while to get that all sorted out. It's not like the insurance company shows up with their checkbook in-hand, ready to make things right. They'll probably drag their feet about coughing up a settlement payment.

I try to close my eyes for a bit of rest, but sleep eludes me. Visions of orange flames greedily eating everything I own dance behind my eyelids. I wish Nacho was here to keep me company, but a friendly neighbor agreed to keep an eye on him. Since I didn't want to uproot the already terrified cat any more than absolutely necessary, I quickly agreed to the arrangement.

The only thing that brings me any peace in the lonely motel room is daydreaming about the beautiful firefighter, who caught my eye the moment I moved to town. I normally force myself not to think about her, since I can't be with her, but I deserve a bit of pleasure after the trauma I've endured today.

It's easy to come up with a scenario to fantasize about Miranda, since I usually make myself stop thinking about her whenever she enters my mind. I picture her handling that huge hose, like the strong badass that she is, but instead of her bulky protective gear, she's wearing a skimpy red bikini that shows off her luscious curves.

I'm already growing firm in my pants from just imagining it. Deciding not to gatekeep myself at all tonight, I reach for my phone, intent on finding some porn that features a female firefighter. I'll put my thumb over the woman's face and imagine Miranda. That will likely do the trick in a matter of moments.

As I move to unzip my pants, a trio of sharp raps at the door startles me.

"What the...?" I mumble as I resituate myself and head toward the door, already frustrated and furious with whoever is

causing this unwanted intrusion into my big plans for the evening.

I fling the door open without bothering to look through the peephole, and the sight before me nearly bowls me over.

Miranda is standing on the other side of the threshold, looking fresh-faced and gorgeous in jeans and a soft hoodie. She's holding a large pizza box and a six-pack of bottled beer.

My eyes nearly pop out of their sockets as I try to determine if this is my overactive imagination playing tricks on me, since I've finally given it free rein for the evening.

Offering me a pretty smile, Miranda says, "After the day you've had, I figured you deserve a greasy pizza and some ice-cold beers."

"It's like you read my mind," I respond as I move to the side of the doorway to give her access to the room.

"Whoa, it's no Charming Falls Inn, is it?" she says as she takes in the room's cheesy décor.

"No, but there is no Charming Falls Inn anymore," I remind her in a flat tone.

Her face crumples as if she has made a huge faux pas. She gives her leg three nervous taps before she mutters, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

Wincing at the knowledge that I've made her feel guilty, I say, "No, don't worry about it. I have to get used to the fact that I've lost everything. Not talking about it won't change that harsh reality."

"No, I suppose not," she says, with her eyes still angled downward.

Hoping to lighten the mood, I say, "Let's dig into that pizza and beer. I think it's exactly what the doctor ordered."

Her eyes brighten as she moves to set the food and drinks down on the chipped, fake wood table.

We sit down on the avocado green, vinyl-covered chairs. Mine sports a giant rip that allows the foam padding to spill

out.

Once we're situated, she flips open the pizza box, and we each grab a large, loaded, and greasy slice. She says something about forgetting plates, but I assure her that there's no need for them as I fold my piece in half and take a large bite.

She follows suit, and I find myself impressed that she digs right in and doesn't bother to pretend to be a dainty eater. She works hard at a physically demanding and emotionally draining job. She should eat pizza like a hungry trucker.

We each crack open a brown bottle of chilled beer and take a hefty swig. Our satisfied 'Ahhs' emerge in tandem and have us grinning like fools at each other.

"This is truly the perfect meal. It hits the spot." I pat my belly before taking another bite of the gooey and delicious pizza.

"Absolutely," she agrees, adding, "I could eat pizza every day for the rest of my life without getting sick of it."

"Well, I don't know about that," I lightly tease her.

Comfortable silence settles over us as we finish our meal.

After she swipes her mouth with a paper napkin, Miranda looks at me with nervous excitement dancing in her gaze. Breaking the silence, she says, "I've been wanting to ask you something."

My heart skips a beat. As much as I know this simmering tension between the two of us shouldn't turn into anything more, I can't stop myself from hoping that it will. Unable to stand the suspense, I say, "Go ahead."

When she speaks, her voice is huskier than normal. "From the day we met, I've felt like there is an undeniable, magnetic attraction between us."

I give the faintest of head nods. While I don't want to lead her on, she doesn't deserve to have her feelings hurt.

She swallows as if she's summoning the courage to continue. "Why haven't you ever acted on it?"

It's a bold question. I guess I should expect nothing less from the strong, no-nonsense woman.

I clear my throat in an obvious attempt to stall for time. She keeps her unwavering gaze locked on me, not letting me off the hook for a moment.

Rubbing my hand along the back of my neck, I finally answer, "It's not that I haven't wanted to pursue a relationship with you. It just isn't a good idea for us to be together."

Lifting her chin, she asks, "What if I think it *is* a good idea?"

"Trust me, it isn't," I answer in a flat tone.

At her narrow-eyed gaze, I expand. "I can't go into the details with you, but it's for your own good."

"How about if you let me decide what is in my own best interest?" Miranda asks, as she stands up and whips her hoodie and T-shirt over her head.

The air bursts from my lungs as she reaches down to unfasten her jeans. Trying not to watch, but mesmerized by the glorious sight of her undressing for me, I say in a gravelly tone, "You're making it damn near impossible for me to resist you."

Stepping out of her jeans and standing before me with her luscious curves covered only by thin wisps of lace and silky fabric, the irresistible woman says simply, "Then don't."

MIRANDA

*M*y mother would be appalled by the forwardness of me undressing in a man's hotel room and practically demanding that he fool around with me, but she's not here to judge me. I like Graham—a lot, and I get the distinct impression that he likes me, too. His misguided attempt to 'protect' me by keeping his distance is horse pucky. I get to decide who is right for me, and I have decided on Graham.

If he truly doesn't want to be with me, then I will immediately leave with no questions asked, but I can tell by the lusty way he's gazing at me that he craves me—at least on a physical level. Of course, I'd like for our relationship to be more than physical, but desire is a start. At this point in my practically celibate life, I'll take what I can get.

Graham looks at me for a long moment. His gaze travels up and down my barely covered body. A less confident woman might try to cover herself, but I refuse to give in to that urge. Instead, I lift my chin higher as my skin burns under his perusal.

When our gazes lock again, he breaks into a wide grin, and I immediately know I've won him over.

He stands and eliminates the distance between us. Leaning down, he presses a soft, tentative kiss to my lips.

He's so close, and his surprisingly soft lips feel amazing. It's been far too long since I've been kissed, and I'm unable to contain my enthusiasm. I moan into his mouth as I deepen the kiss.

My fingers glide through the hair at the nape of his neck as we passionately explore each other's mouths.

When he pulls back, we're both breathing heavily. His eyelids are droopy as he stares down at me and whispers, "This isn't a good idea, Miranda."

"I think it is," I whisper back, already tipping up for more kisses.

He leans further away from me and says, "There's so much about me that you don't know, and you wouldn't like any of it."

"Okay, then," I say amiably. "Let's talk about what I *do* know about you."

I take his silence for agreement and begin ticking off his features with my fingers as I voice them. "You're incredibly hardworking and independent. You love a stray cat that no one else wanted, and more importantly, that cat loves you back. You are kind, even to people who don't quite deserve it—like grumpy Mrs. Swindell. You're handsome, sweet, and charming."

Unsure whether to bring it up or not, I decide to go all-in, "Oh, and you lost everything today."

His gaze is downcast at the reminder of his devastating loss. I reach up to cup his scruffy cheek with my palm as I say, "So, I think it is high time for you to accept some comfort from someone else. You deserve to forget about everything and feel good for a little while."

He still seems somewhat wary, so I add, "No strings attached."

Those seem to be the magic words because he tips down and kisses me with renewed fire. This time, he doesn't hold back at all. His tongue delves into my mouth as his hands create a searing path across my bare skin.

I press into him, aching for more.

He pulls back just long enough to remove his shirt. When I reach for his pants, he doesn't stop me.

My eyes are drawn to the hefty bulge straining against his underwear. The man is even sexier without his clothes than I imagined.

I lick my lips. Unable to stop myself, I do it two more times. *So much for being a sexy siren. He's going to think I'm an obsessive-compulsive weirdo, who can't control her own tongue.*

If he notices my tick, he gives no indication of it. In fact, he's gazing at me as if I am the sexiest person that he's ever laid eyes on, and I like it—a lot.

Addicted to that look, I sidle forward in what I hope is a sexy manner and cup his manhood over his underwear. My voice emerges as barely more than a whisper when I say, “You give off serious B.D.E., Graham. Although I haven't encountered very many of them, I'd have to say that swagger is justified.”

His brow is furrowed in confusion when he asks, “B.D.E.?”

I tip up onto my toes and delight in his happy chuckle when I whisper near his ear, “Big dick energy.”

GRAHAM

*M*y good intentions and will power both sailed right out the window when Miranda showed up at my hotel room with food, beer, and an obvious determination to get me into bed tonight. *Afterall, who am I to turn down an impossibly sexy woman, who very clearly wants my body?*

It's a good thing I wasn't taking a pull from my beer bottle when she began talking about my B.D.E., or I would have likely done a spit-take clear across the room. Just when I think the desirable woman can't possibly be any more adorable, she goes and proves me wrong.

Once my chuckles subside, I shake my head and say, "Based on our jobs, most people would assume that you are tougher than me, and it may be true. I enjoy going antiquing and watching real estate fixer-upper shows. Considering your phenomenal physique, I'm guessing you like to spend your time lifting cars and wrestling alligators."

She giggles at the ridiculous mental image. Leveling a serious look down at her, I say, "But you should know that I like to take charge in the bedroom. I expect to be the alpha in our relationship."

After swallowing and blinking three times, her voice comes out a little shaky when she says, "I'm okay with that. My job requires me to always be tough enough to keep up with the guys, but it doesn't stop me from daydreaming about being shoved back against a wall with my hands pinned above my head."

Happy to oblige her, I swiftly do just that.

She gasps in surprise at the sudden move, but when I tip down to crush my lips to hers, she quickly recovers. This time, our kissing is different—raw and tinged with desperation for each other.

When I press into her, shoving her back into the wall, she moans into my mouth, spurring me on. Instinct takes over as I lean down to kiss the long column of her neck. As the tip of my tongue glides across her smooth skin, she breathes out the word, “More.”

With one hand still pinning her arms over her head, I use my free hand to wrench her bra out of the way. She arches her back, practically begging for my attention on her lush, bare breasts. My palm is magnetized to her warm, soft skin.

She is so responsive as I roll her nipple into a taut nub, my other hand can't resist coming down to explore as I kneel down before her.

Once her hands are free, they delve into my hair and pull my face to her. That bit of encouragement is all I need. Her breast is instantly in my mouth.

She shoves herself at me as if no matter how much I give, she wants more. Her obvious need for me is heady and addictive. I'm happy to give her anything she wants.

My hands cradle the soft skin at her sides. As I suckle the nub her nipple has puckered into, my palms glide down and grip her hips.

She strains into my touch and cries out when my teeth graze her sensitive skin.

I immediately soothe the tender flesh with my tongue, making a moan emerge from deep in her throat. The sexy sound makes what little blood was left in my head rush to my crotch.

Grabbing the sides of her lacy panties, I slide them down her legs. She daintily steps out of them. When she's completely bare before me, I tip back on my heels to take a long look at her luscious body.

She quivers under my admiring, desirous gaze.

Anticipation practically crackles in the air between us as I take my time lifting one of her legs and gently placing it on my shoulder.

She's panting and her eyes are half-lidded as if it's all she can do to keep them open and trained on me.

I turn my face to the side and kiss my way up her inner thigh. When I'm almost at the apex, she rears her head back and cracks it against the paneled wall.

Concerned for her, I stand and reach back to caress the area.

"I'm fine," she assures me.

Her expression is filled with desperation. I'm sure she would say anything to get me to kneel back down in front of her.

Deciding this isn't comfortable enough for either of us, I say, "Get on the bed."

My demanding tone doesn't cause her to pause for even a moment. Instead, she immediately moves to comply with my request.

I pull back the covers and situate a pillow under her head. After tenderly kissing her forehead, I ask, "Are you sure that bump didn't give you a headache?"

"Don't worry about my head," she whispers. Giving me a sly smile, she adds, "The only thing on me that aches is down here."

The surprised chuckle bursts out of me when she uses her hand to indicate her swollen lower lips. Not wanting to torture either of us any longer than necessary, I say, "I'll bet I can take care of that."

With those cocky words, I move down and begin devouring her sweet pussy.

MIRANDA

Graham's tongue is magic. That's the only possible explanation for the bliss he is creating between my legs. Liquid warmth spreads throughout my body as I shamelessly buck my hips up into his skillful mouth.

He has my lower lips parted, and I'm quaking beneath his touch. He's driving me mad, and I don't even care. I just want more. I need all of him. I'll gladly take anything he will give me.

I tremble with need as pleasure begins swirling deep in my belly. His tongue flicks my clit, then slides down my slit to thrust inside me. My fists ball and grip handfuls of the overly bleached bed sheet.

My body is wound so tight, it feels like the slightest trigger will detonate a massive internal explosion. As much as I want this anticipation to last, I also want to let go. I turn my head from side to side, fighting the urge to release.

This time when Graham resumes stroking my clit, we make eye contact. His eyes are filled with desire, and—even though I know it can't possibly be true—it appears that they are also shining with love.

That warm, loving look is all it takes to start the spiral within me. Unable to hold back any longer, my gaze rolls back to the ceiling as my breath begins coming in frantic pants and my heart nearly pounds out of my chest.

Graham reaches up to clasp one of my hands, without stopping the glorious sweeping strokes of his tongue. I

squeeze his hand and buck my hips.

He pauses just long enough to say, “That’s it, baby. Come undone for me.”

When his tongue begins circling my aching nub, I have no other choice but to obey his request. My toes curl and my entire body tenses and pulses as wave after wave of searing-hot pleasure surges through me.

I’m still shuddering with blissful aftershocks when Graham moves up my body. At some point he removed his underwear because I feel the velvety, hot tip of his cock nudging my opening.

My mouth falls open at how good that simple touch feels. I’ll probably completely lose my mind when he glides all the way inside me.

He’s gazing down at me as if I am the most magnificent being he’s ever encountered, so I notice the moment his expression darkens.

Lifting my palm to cup his cheek, I ask, “What’s wrong?”

He pulls back slightly, and I immediately miss his intimate touch. His voice is quiet, but clear when he says, “I don’t have a condom.”

“Oh,” I say, sounding just as disappointed as I feel. Brightening when I remember, I add, “I’m on the birth control pill.”

He gives me a slightly confused look, so I rush on to explain. “It’s to regulate my periods. I haven’t been intimate with anyone in longer than I care to admit.”

“Same.” He chuckles.

A shiver of happiness tingles through my body at his admission that he hasn’t slept with anyone lately. I suspected that was the case, but am glad to have verbal confirmation of it.

We live in a small town, so I was fairly certain I’d have heard about any of his flings, but it’s always possible for

something to avoid the infamous grapevine—especially with his easy access to out-of-towners at the inn.

“So, we’re good to move forward?” he asks with hope visible in his gaze.

“Full steam ahead,” I grin and nod to back up my answer.

Once he has permission, he doesn’t hesitate for a moment. He instantly lines us up and slides inside me.

My eyes open wide at the wonderful invasion. All of the lighthearted levity from a moment ago, evaporates as passion takes the wheel.

I wrap my arms and legs tight around him as he soaks deep inside me. We stay frozen like that for several long moments. I’ve never felt so close to anyone—physically or emotionally. It’s truly like we have combined ourselves into one being. Our quick breaths are even synchronized.

As wonderful as it is being fully connected to him, my body begins demanding movement. It craves the delicious friction that will be created when Graham begins moving in and out of me.

When I wiggle my hips, Graham’s chest heaves with his chuckle, just before he teases me, “Someone’s impatient.”

“I just want you so much,” I whisper near his ear.

His cheek puffs out toward mine as he smiles at my admission. Remaining locked deep within me, he tilts up to gaze down at me. With sincerity in his tone, he says, “I want you, too. So much. And I have since the day we met.”

His words thrill me, and I want to take them at face value. But I can’t help noticing how his eyes darken with concern. Not wanting the answer, but unable to stop myself from asking, I prompt him. “But?”

“But I…” He pauses and seems to rethink telling me something. Eventually, he says, “It’s a little late to worry about that now.”

He emphasizes his words by sliding in and out of me.

Refusing to let this perfect moment be ruined by vague concerns, I murmur, “Absolutely.”

Soon, we are lost in each other. We moan and thrust. He rams into me and I lift my ass higher to meet him each time, unable to get close enough to him.

When he slows and reaches down between us, I thrash my head and say, “I don’t think I can.”

“You will,” he growls out the command near my ear as his rough fingers brush over my sensitive nub.

I’m helpless to stop the tidal wave that once more rises within me.

Graham switches between long and short strokes, until he finds a spot that makes my vision go hazy. With his fingers working my swollen clit, he says in a gravelly tone, “I want to feel your slick pussy clenching around my bare cock.”

As if his wish is my command, the dirty talk sends me over the edge of the cliff. My core tightens as sweet pleasure courses through my veins. I pump and squeeze around him.

He presses his face into my collarbone as we grind together. His guttural moan spreads across the tiny room as his hot streams of cum fill me.

Satisfaction washes over me as we flop down on the bed, completely spent. He feels like he weighs a thousand pounds on top of me, and I couldn’t be any happier about it.

GRAHAM

*D*espite how much I told myself that sleeping with Miranda was a bad idea, I can't worry about that right now. I'm too blissed-out to feel guilty. I'll deal with my shame for being weak tomorrow.

Getting naked with Miranda was even more amazing than I imagined it would be. In fact, it can't possibly get much better than that. It was *that* good.

I'm sprawled out on top of her with my whole weight bearing down on her. I know I should move and let her take a deep, full breath, but it feels so good to rest on her. It's the most fully relaxed I've been in years.

Although I know I shouldn't fall asleep on her, my eyelids refuse to stay open. Maybe if I just close them for a second...

The jangling of my cell phone startles me awake. I'm so disoriented, I have no idea if it's been five minutes or five hours. What I do know is that my body feels better than ever. It's like being a teenager again. I've been Miranda-fied, and I like it.

As much as I'd love to ignore my phone, the tune playing is one of my brother's hits, which I set as his ringtone. He's likely returning my frantic call from earlier when I left him a message about the fire at the inn.

I groan as I roll off Miranda to reach for the blaring device on the peeling laminate bedside table.

She lets out an unhappy mewl, so I say, "My brother is probably worried about me after hearing about the fire. I

should take this, but I won't be long."

After nodding her agreement, Miranda stands and pads into the bathroom as I answer the phone, with an abrupt, "It's about time you called me back, Bud."

Gavin apologizes profusely for missing my call and explains that he left his phone in his dressing room while he rehearsed for a show.

I let him off the hook by saying, "There's nothing you could have done anyway. The inn is destroyed."

If my little brother notices that my voice cracks at the end of that statement, he gives no indication of it. Instead, he immediately goes into fix-it mode. "What can I do to help? Do you need some cash to tide you over? Do you want me to have my assistant track down the best construction crew in your area?"

While I appreciate his willingness to help, I really just wanted to vent to someone who cares about me, so I say, "Nah, Bud. Thanks, but the place is insured, and I have enough money in the bank to survive for a while. I'll hit you up for cash if that runs out."

We share a chuckle because we both know that I am too proud to accept a handout from my kid brother, even though he is a super successful, famous musician who would be happy to do it.

Miranda flips the bathroom light on and off three times before returning to bed.

I finish my chat with my brother. His hectic schedule never leaves him much time to talk, but I know he'll always be there for me if I really need him and that he would do anything for me.

When we hang up, I turn to face the beautiful firefighter in my bed. Grinning at her, I joke, "My busy rock star brother finally found time to check in on me after the fire."

"Oh, I forgot that you are related to Gavin Timberbatch. Your different last names throw me off," she says.

“Yeah, he changed his name from Timber when he first started out in the music biz. I think it’s because he wanted his groupies to be called Timberbitches, but he denies that was his plan.”

Miranda chuckles. I love the sound of it.

Suddenly, what she said fully sinks in. “You forgot I was related to him? He’s the first thing most women want to talk to me about. In fact, I’ve been used many times by his raving fans hoping to get an ‘in’ with Gavin.”

After an appalled gasp, Miranda scrunches her eyebrows together and says, “That’s awful! What is wrong with people?”

“I don’t know.” I smile at the adorable woman, who is so different than anyone I’ve ever known. “Even when we were kids, Gavin always had that ‘it’ factor that the ladies seem to love. I am the older brother, but girls were always using me to get close to him.”

Miranda cups my cheek with her cool palm. “I’m so sorry that happened to you. It must have been tough.”

“Aw, there are some perks to having a rock star brother.” I try to downplay the hurt I’ve suffered from Gavin’s magnetism and fame, but Miranda’s beautiful, clear eyes seem to see right through me.

Needing to change the subject, I say, “But guess what?”

“What?” she asks, her eyes alight with anticipation.

“Hearing that you forgot I’m related to him has to be about the sweetest thing ever. How about if I show you my appreciation in the shower?”

The words are barely out of my mouth before Miranda jumps up and runs toward the bathroom.

Like any sane man, I lunge out of the bed and hurry after her.

MIRANDA

When Graham suggested that we shower together, I couldn't think of anything that would make me happier. But now that we're under the steamy spray together, I'm wishing that I'd found an excuse not to join him in here.

I keep telling myself that I don't need to tap the tiny shampoo bottle three times or roll the slick bar of soap between my palms six times, but the more I try to convince myself it is unnecessary, the worse the urge gets.

Graham and I are slick with soap and rubbing together in all the right places when I pat his shoulder twice. My hand shakes with the effort of not adding a third, but I want to prove to myself that I can refrain from doing it.

Showing that he's as observant as he is kind, Graham says, "Go ahead and do it a third time."

I don't want to be relieved, but the air spews from my lungs as I give his shoulder that third pat. Giving him a sheepish grin, I say, "I guess I have my crazy on full display on our first date."

"It's not crazy," he assures me.

I level a no-nonsense look at him, so he says, "Sure, it's a bit of a quirk, but we all have those. Besides, it's not like it's hurting anyone."

"True," I admit. Brightening, I ask, "What is one of your quirks?"

“Mm—I don’t know if we’re ready for that,” he teases me as he shuts off the water and begins drying me off with one of the threadbare white towels.

“Oh, come on,” I cajole him. “You know my big one, so we need to even things up.”

He thinks it over as he finishes drying me and swipes the same towel across his damp skin. Giving me a resigned expression, he says, “Okay, I’ll tell you one.”

The anticipation is practically killing me as I gaze up at him, waiting for him to spill it.

After dropping the wet towel on the floor, he says, “I always read the last chapter of a book first to make sure I’m going to like the ending.”

A bewildered laugh emerges from my lips. That oddity is nothing compared with feeling compelled to do so many of life’s mundane tasks in triplicate. But I appreciate that he tried to make me feel better, so I pretend to be appalled by his admission as I say, “Doing that spoils the surprise. That’s crazy.”

“I know, right?” he says good-naturedly.

“If you weren’t so phenomenal in bed, that might be a deal breaker,” I tease him.

He waggles his brows suggestively. “You think I’m good in bed?”

“The best,” I purr, tipping up to kiss him on the lips.

He groans as my breasts brush across his abdomen. Just when I begin to think he may not comment on how he thought our lovemaking session was, he thrills me by saying, “Right back at ya’.”

“In that case, I’d say it’s time for round two.” With those words, I turn to open the door and make a break for it.

He follows right behind me.

When I turn to face him, we topple naked, damp, and embracing back into the bed.

GRAHAM

Something's terribly wrong. I can feel it. The phone call that woke us both up this morning and caused Miranda to untangle her soft, warm body from mine in order to answer it is not good news.

A gruff voice shouts, "Wilson!" loud enough for me to hear it, even though she's holding the phone up to her ear. The brisk, one-sided monologue that ensues is just a jumble of mumbling from my perspective, but the caller has Miranda on high alert.

Miranda and I just had the best night of my entire life, but now she's practically bristling with angry energy. She's sitting upright in the bed with the sheet pulled up to cover her nakedness, and I can tell by her clipped responses that she is censoring her half of the conversation—most likely because I'm here.

"Yes, sir. I understand," she says in a professional tone.

After listening for a bit longer, she says, "Thanks for the update, Chief. I'll head right in to the station."

As soon as she hangs up, I reach my arms out toward her, hoping she'll rejoin me in bed for a few more minutes of cuddling. She ignores my gesture, opting instead to stand up, taking the bed's sheet with her.

I watch, confused, as she carefully tucks the white sheet tight around her chest and begins snatching her clothes from the floor. After the night we had, her sudden modesty makes no sense.

Placing my elbow on the pillow, I lean up to ask, “Is everything okay?”

“No, not really,” she answers crisply as she stomps toward the bathroom.

Suddenly stopping, she turns to face me. Her complexion is overly pale when she asks in a flat tone, “Did you start the fire at your inn?”

Her question absolutely floors me. I gape at her, wondering if this is some type of sick joke, but it’s obvious from her strained expression that she is dead serious. My eyebrows snap together as I answer, “No, of course not. Why would you think that?”

Although she sags with a tiny bit of relief at my response, I can tell that she doesn’t fully believe me. She runs a hand through her hair before saying, “The investigators determined that the fire was arson, and they found an empty gas can with a pair of your work gloves in the inn’s shed.”

“They think that is proof that I started the fire?” I practically spit out the words. Disbelief swirls with anger as I add, “The inn is my home and my place of business. I’m bad about keeping the gas can for the lawn mower full, and there are probably twenty pairs of my work gloves spread throughout that shed.”

She nods, but her expression remains somber when she hints, “That’s not all.”

I stare at her, silently telling her to rip off the bandage.

“The tech team did a deep dive on your social media. Thanks to the Life Chat data breach they were able to locate private messages between you and someone named Xander where you threatened to burn down the inn for the insurance money,” she says in a quiet tone.

Blood swirls in my head as I slowly shake it back and forth. I get the distinct impression that I might pass out, even though I’ve never done so before.

When my vision finally clears, I see that Miranda is looking at me like she doesn’t know me at all. The

disappointment in her gaze nearly guts me.

“No, you don’t understand,” I say a bit too sharply.

She flinches, so I sit up in the bed and temper my tone before adding, “This is all a big misunderstanding. Xander is my cousin. He just bought a small beachside hotel in Alabama. We like to commiserate with each other about the intricacies and challenges of owning a hotel. The constant maintenance tends to completely take over your life, but we both love what we do and wouldn’t change it for anything.”

“Then why did you say you wanted to burn it down for a payout?” she asks.

“I was joking,” I half-shout. She bugs her eyes out at me, so I take a deep, calming breath before continuing. “Sometimes the unending work list seems overwhelming, but I love my inn. That place is my whole life. I would never set it on fire. In hindsight, the joke was in poor taste, but it truly never crossed my mind that it might actually burn to the ground. I still can’t quite believe it happened.”

“Well, if it was you, it wasn’t a very smart move because the insurance won’t pay out for arson,” she tells me.

“It wasn’t me,” I whisper. Suddenly remembering, I add, “I wasn’t even there. I was at the grocery store. Mrs. Swindell saw me.”

Standing and pointing toward the closed, avocado-green and golden-yellow striped curtains covering the window, I add, “My groceries are still in the back of my Jeep. I was so distraught by seeing my home as a raging inferno that I completely forgot about them, until now. I can show you.”

She takes a step back away from me, which makes my heart ache in my chest. “That won’t be necessary.”

It dawns on me, then, that I’m fully nude. With her current concerns about my character, it’s only natural that she is uncomfortable with me moving toward her.

While I grab my underwear and put them on, she scurries toward the bathroom. Just before closing the door, she says, “I’ll just be in here a minute, then I’ll be out of your hair.”

I long to say that her leaving is the last thing I want, but I sense that isn't what she wants to hear from me right now. Her lack of trust in me is confirmed when the click of the bathroom door's lock echoes throughout the room.

MIRANDA

I lean back on the closed bathroom door and allow the tears burning the backs of my eyes to trail down my cheeks. Graham is the most amazing man I've ever known. He gave me the most marvelous, life-affirming feelings last night. I hadn't even realized it was possible to be that connected to someone.

But now, I'm doubting everything I thought I knew about him. I ache to believe he's telling the truth and that he would never set his own inn on fire, but the evidence against him is pretty damning. *Besides, who else would benefit from its demise?*

As far as I know, he doesn't have any enemies who would do this to hurt him. He's really the only logical suspect in this crime, which totally irks me because I was really starting to fall for him.

Despite how much I need another shower, I decide there isn't time. Plus, I'm not sure I want to wash Graham's scent from my skin just yet. If it turns out that he did this, I won't ever be with him like this again, and I'm not quite ready to give up the last traces of our wonderful night together.

I quickly dress, splash cold water on my face, and use my finger to brush my teeth. Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I realize that my hair is a mess and there are dark circles under my eyes, but this is the best I can do under the circumstances.

Steeling my nerves, I take a deep breath. I'm not strong enough to face Graham right now, but I have to in order to get

out of this hotel room. All I want to do is run into his loving embrace, but I can't do that because it's quite possible that he is an arsonist.

Reminding myself that someone could have been hurt in that fire, I unlock the bathroom door and charge back into Graham's room.

He's fully dressed and the pleading look he gives me almost makes me waiver. Instead, I shift my gaze to the floor as I stalk toward the door and say, "I need to get to the firehouse."

"Miranda, please. You have to believe me. I didn't do this," Graham says, sounding utterly sincere.

Turning to face him, I say honestly, "I want to believe you, Graham. I really do. But I'm not sure what to think. What I do know is that I need to get to work. Perhaps I can help figure this out and clear your name."

Graham's face is pale and drawn with worry. I long to reach out and comfort him, but I won't allow myself to do that while I have any doubt about his innocence.

I start to go, but freeze when Graham calls out, "Wait!"

He hesitates, and when I turn to look in his eyes, I can tell that he's trying to decide whether or not to confide in me about something.

Fear ices my veins as I wonder if he's getting ready to admit to me that he was actually the one who set the fire. I wait for him to speak, ready to lunge for the door at the first sign of any danger.

His gaze is downcast toward the floor as if he can't stand to maintain eye contact with me when he says, "I have some enemies. Bad enemies."

Intrigued, I take one step in his direction. I can't imagine why anyone would hate the affable, hardworking inn keeper, but I'm desperate for any evidence that may prove he isn't the one behind this fire.

Although I want to prompt him to go on, I sense that it's best to wait and let him share what he has to say at his own pace.

He sits down on the bed and indicates the spot beside him. I shake my head to indicate I'll remain standing where I am—by the door and ready to make a break for it if the need arises.

My nerves are already shot, so the wait for him to spill whatever he has to say seems interminable. I rub the car key in my hand. *One-two-three... four-five-six... seven-eight-nine.*

The ritual does nothing to help calm my frazzled nerves. I nearly jump out of my skin when he finally speaks.

“I grew up in Idaho. Even back then, before Gavin was famous, he had that ‘it’ factor that made everyone want a piece of him. I was the older brother, but he was the magnetic one. Despite how much I love him, I got sick of constantly living in his shadow.”

That makes perfect sense, but I can't imagine how this relates to Graham's inn burning down.

Still staring at the ugly shag carpet, Graham continues. “When I graduated, I wanted to get as far as possible away from the dull, disappointing life I'd lived up until that point. It wasn't Gavin's fault, but I needed to be far from him and the oppressive pressure of never living up to the expectations people had for me as his brother.”

Despite how much I long to reach out to the visibly downtrodden man, I ball my fists at my side, digging my nails into my palms.

I'm not sure what to believe and nothing he's said so far has given me any reason to think someone else committed the arson. *Surely, he doesn't expect me to conclude that his famous rock star brother had something to do with the fire?*

“Needing a clean break and hoping to become my own man, I moved to New York City. Those dreams of making a name for myself away from my brother were quickly crushed when I realized that I wasn't qualified for any jobs that would allow me to make enough money to survive in the city. I

refused to tuck tail and go back to Idaho, so when the opportunity to make some fast cash fell into my lap, I took it.”

I’m starting to get a sense of where this is going, but I’m not sure if his revelations are making me more or less uneasy.

“The first job they gave me was easy and lucrative. That’s how they suck you in. I just delivered a package to an address and was paid handsomely for my discretion. I kept my head down and didn’t ask any questions. Soon, I started moving up in the organization, and that’s when I realized that I had unwittingly joined the mafia.”

I let out a small gasp at this revelation.

Graham pauses for a second, but forges on. “You’ve probably heard of infamous mob boss, Jerry Columbus?”

He looks expectantly up at me, so I bob my head up and down in answer to his question.

“Well, I was in the middle of his crime ring. I was making big money, but the jobs they required me to do were...”

He pauses to search for the right word. Finally, he lands on, “Unsavory. I wasn’t comfortable with my role in any of the illegal activities, but once you’re ingrained in a group like that, it’s next to impossible to get out—unless you’re in a body bag.”

Unsure how long my legs will continue to support me as he shares these jaw-dropping bombshells with me, I move to sit beside him on the bed. Oddly enough, I’m no longer frightened of him, even though he’s admitting to me that he was, or possibly still is, a member of the most notorious mob in New York City.

My mind refuses to equate the mental image of the sweet and hardworking inn owner, who rocked my world last night, with a dangerous criminal, who does whatever his evil boss asks of him.

Not seeming to sense my inner turmoil, Graham continues, “When I found out that one of Jerry’s capos was planning to take him out and make a play for the top spot, I saw that as my

chance to escape. I traded the information to Jerry for my freedom.”

“Phew!” The breath I’d been holding releases from my lungs.

Graham turns to give me a half-smile before saying, “But that isn’t the end of the story.”

GRAHAM

I can't believe I'm sharing all of this with Miranda. I've never told anyone anything about my connections to the mob. My silence was mostly due to shame, regret, and fear.

It became obvious this morning that I was going to lose any sliver of a chance I had of building a life with Miranda if I didn't tell her what I know, so here I am, laying it all on the line.

She is perched on the edge of the bed as if she is ready to run at a moment's notice. Not that I blame her. The woman just found out the man she spent last night with is a terrible criminal. No one deserves that, especially not a wonderful, upstanding person, like Miranda.

Knowing I need to tell her the rest, I take a deep breath before saying, "Jerry dealt with the threat and promised to do what he could to protect me, since informants are not looked upon favorably by most members of that organization."

Miranda nods and says quietly, "Snitches get stitches."

I chuckle, unable to believe how calm she is. "Apparently, some of the capo's crew figured out that I was the one who talked to the boss because I've received several threatening letters at the inn."

Miranda's eyes widen at this news, but she remains quiet.

Hoping to make her understand, I say, "My dangerous enemies are the reason why I've always kept you at arm's length. I couldn't risk you getting dragged into my mess. But

last night, I was so devastated, I let my guard down. I'm sorry for not protecting you better."

Lifting her chin, she says, "I can protect myself."

I wouldn't expect anything less from the strong, stubborn woman, but she doesn't understand the full magnitude of what we're dealing with here. "Under normal circumstances, I would totally agree with you, but these people are ruthless. Since they feel their capo was wronged by me, they'll stop at nothing to get revenge. If they find out I care about you, your life will be in danger, and I won't risk that."

Looking at me with renewed faith shining in her gaze, Miranda says, "I'm glad you told me about this, but I wish you had trusted me enough to confide in me earlier. We could have faced this together."

It fills me with joy that she is firmly by my side, even after hearing my shameful secrets, but I can't allow her to put herself at risk. "Don't you see? We can't be together. You'll never be safe with me in your life."

She frowns before saying, "But they burned down your inn. They took your home and your livelihood. Isn't that enough revenge for any wrongdoings they feel you've committed?"

Resigned, I slowly shake my head. "It will never be enough. Besides, even if they leave me alone for a while, I'll never know when they might strike again. I can't put you in that kind of danger."

"But that means they are stealing your entire life. You can never be happy with anyone if you're always worried about them showing up at some point and hurting those that you love. You'll always be stuck alone and looking over your shoulder. That isn't fair!"

I love how outraged she is on my behalf. Having made peace with the situation a long time ago, I say, "This half-life is still better than being ingrained in the organization and doing their bidding. At least I can live quietly without being forced to commit crimes that go against everything I believe

in. Maybe I'll slip under their radar after a while, or they'll find new targets to torment."

"They don't get to steal your happiness," Miranda says with fire burning in her eyes. "Give me the letters, and I'll take them to the chief. We'll make sure the responsible parties are tracked down and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

It's refreshing that she's innocent enough to believe that mobsters play by the same rules as everyone else.

When I shake my head, she guesses correctly in a somber tone, "The letters burned in the fire."

I nod my answer before saying, "I never meant to involve you in any of this, but I couldn't stand the idea of you believing me to be an arsonist—even from a distance."

Instantly picking up on my hint, Miranda asks, "A distance?"

"Yes, we need to protect you from the dangers of my past. It's impossible to know when they may resurface to come after me, so I plan to be far away from you and Charming Falls when it happens. As much as I hate to say it, this needs to be the last time we see each other, Miranda."

MIRANDA

*M*y mind is racing as I try to absorb all of the shocking revelations Graham has shared with me. The worst of which being that he never wants to see me again.

Graham has been my secret fantasy since he moved to Charming Falls. Last night, he proved himself to be even more wonderful than my vivid daydreams. But now that we've finally admitted our feelings to each other and found out that we have an undeniable, world shifting connection, he wants to leave.

I understand that he's just trying to protect me, but this can't be how things are supposed to work out for us. It simply isn't fair.

My fingers tap together as I try to process. *One-two-three... Four-five-six... Seven-eight-nine... Ten-eleven-twelve...*

The tapping is probably annoying Graham, but he gives no indication of it.

Thirteen-fourteen-fifteen... sixteen-seventeen-eighteen... nineteen-twenty—That's it!

Graham looks over when I don't complete the third tap in the sequence. He apparently already realizes that this is completely out of character for me.

After bolting up from my seated position, I barely glance back at Graham as I say, "I need to get to the fire station."

I freeze near the hotel room's door when I hear Graham ask in a resigned voice, "Can I have one last kiss?"

Turning back to face him, I say, "You can have a kiss, but promise me it won't be our last."

The grim expression on his face tells me that he believes it will indeed be our last.

He stands and we quickly bridge the gap between us. Placing my hands on the sides of his face and gazing up into his eyes, I say, "I mean it. Promise me that you won't leave town before I have a chance to straighten this out."

"I love it that you're so willing to help, but you can't fix this, Miranda. It's too big of a mess, and it's my problem—not yours."

The loving look he's raining down on me is addictive. I want to feel its shine on my face for the rest of my days. "There is no mine and yours. If someone is after you, then they may as well come after me, too, because we are a team. We can overcome any obstacle, as long as we're together."

He grins before pressing a tender kiss to my forehead.

I close my eyes and savor the warmth of his soft lips.

When he pulls back, I look up at him and say, "Wait, that wasn't my goodbye kiss, was it? I'd like a better one than that."

Deciding I'd better clarify, I add, "I mean goodbye for now, not goodbye for good."

He blinks once, which I hope signifies agreement, but I don't get the chance to ask because he leans down and tenderly brushes his lips against mine. All rational thought vacates my brain as my entire being focuses on his soft, slow kiss.

When Graham deepens the kiss and sweeps his tongue into my mouth, I moan—completely lost in the sweet sensation of our affectionate connection. I wrap my arms tight around him and try to wordlessly convey the love and forgiveness I feel for him.

As much as I don't want to let him go, I know that the sooner I get to work and take care of what I need to, the sooner I can be back in his loving embrace.

I pull back slightly, but Graham clings to me for a moment. He clearly doesn't want to let me go, but he forces himself to release his hold on me.

Pressing my index finger to his lips, I say, "I'll be back as soon as I can. Don't leave."

He nods, but I can tell by the resigned look in his eyes that he thinks this is the end for us.

GRAHAM

I care about Miranda far too much to let her put herself in any danger for me. It's bad enough that the brave woman fights fires for a living. She doesn't need to be putting herself at risk with ruthless mobsters on my behalf.

As much as I don't want to leave this town that has become my home or the incredible woman who has stolen my heart, I know that I don't have any other choice. I need to get out of here before I'm targeted again. My guess is that the next time they come, they won't stop at just destroying property. These are the kind of criminals who prefer to exact their revenge by drawing blood, and they like to start with the loved ones of their prey. If they find out how much I care about Miranda, she'll be in extreme danger.

There aren't any belongings for me to pack in my Jeep, since I don't have anything left. I take one long, last look around the cheesy motel room where I spent the most unforgettable night of my life. I need to sear the memories of it into my brain, since I won't ever again have the privilege of being with the woman of my dreams.

I grab the package of Oreos from the grocery bags still sitting in the back of my Jeep. After scarfing down a few of them and guzzling half of a cold Coke from the motel's vending machine, I decide that my 'breakfast of champions' should give me enough energy to drive for a few hours.

Even though I know I should leave and never look back, I can't stop myself from turning the Jeep toward the center of

town. I need to see the remnants of my beloved inn one last time in order to imprint it on my brain that it's truly gone.

After parking, I get out of the Jeep and stare at the smoldering pile of rubble that has been my entire life for the past few years. The charred black and gray remains create a stark contrast with today's crisp, clear blue sky.

I've spent countless hours upgrading every tiny detail in this place, and now it's been completely destroyed. Even if by some miracle, I got the money to rebuild and felt it was safe to do so, the place would never be the same. All of that time, care, and elbow grease went up in flames—obliterated in a matter of minutes.

A few passersby give me wide-eyed looks, but no one speaks. It makes me wonder if the rumor has already started spreading that I am suspected of setting the fire. There's no communication system faster than a small-town grapevine, especially when the story is as juicy as arson.

Reminding myself that I shouldn't worry about what any of these people think, since I'll never be able to come back to this place again, I say a final, silent goodbye to the barebones superstructure and ashes that are all that is left of my homestead and business.

The last thing I want to do is leave Miranda or Charming Falls, but I know in my heart that is exactly what I must do. If the only way to protect what I love is to keep my distance from it, then that is what will happen—even though the mere idea of abandoning my home and the woman I love is crushing my heart.

I close my eyes, tip my head back, and take in a deep breath.

Once I'm far from here, I'll call to arrange a meeting with Jerry Columbus to get this mess straightened out. Jerry will be furious that any of his underlings struck out on their own against me. Hopefully, he'll figure out who did this and make sure they don't track me down in my new home.

With my plan in place, I walk with renewed determination back to my Jeep.

After making an illegal U-turn in the middle of the road, I speed towards the outskirts of town. It's tempting to look in my rear-view mirror, but I refuse to glance back. I need to keep my focus on what's ahead of me, even though it's not anything I want.

At first, I think the sound is in my imagination. Perhaps wishful thinking has convinced my ears that they are actually hearing the sound they most crave. Then I realize it's quite possible that the siren is real, and it's a cop chasing me down for the U-turn or for speeding through the center of town.

Even though I warned myself not to look back, I have no choice but to use the rear-view mirror as the blaring noise draws closer.

I blink a couple of times, almost unable to believe my eyes. Sure enough, a red fire truck is racing after me.

It hits me then that the arsonists may not have stopped at burning down my place. They might have struck again.

Fear ices my veins as I realize that Miranda's apartment is on this side of town. I'll never forgive myself if her property has been damaged. And if she's been hurt... *Well, I can't even think about that.*

I pull the Jeep over to the side of the road, planning to follow the fire engine to make sure they aren't headed to Miranda's place. To my surprise, the truck slows and pulls to a stop right behind me.

Confusion and worry swirl together in my head as I try to figure out what's going on.

Do they still think I started the fire and are trying to keep me from leaving town? Has there been another fire? Did something happen to Miranda?

The potential reasons for them to chase me down like this invade my brain, and none of them are good.

GRAHAM

*B*y the time I scurry out of my Jeep to see what's wrong, Miranda is running toward me. She hurls herself into my arms before saying, "You don't have to leave."

Trying not to think about how amazing it feels to have her in my arms one last time, I say, "Staying here is not an option for me."

Before I can continue, she says, "Yes, it is. Your name has been cleared in the arson case. Mrs. Swindell and several other witnesses placed you at the grocery store at the time the fire started. Plus, a neighbor's security camera caught images of two men in dark clothing skulking around the inn with a gas can right before the fire started."

A small amount of relief surges at this news. Giving her a half-smile, I say, "At least criminal charges won't follow me to wherever I end up."

"It's only a matter of time until we catch the people who did this and lock them away for good," she says confidently.

I have my doubts about that, but I love how innocent her faith in the system is. Not wanting to crush her beliefs, I say, "I hope so."

Her eyebrows furrow together at my unenthusiastic response. "Don't you see? You can stay here now."

"I wish I could," I say, unable to stop myself from brushing the back of my index finger along her soft cheek.

At her confused expression, I explain, “We don’t know how deep this hatred of me goes. The capo I ratted out had a lot of followers and support. Even if the two men who did the actual dirty work are locked away, it doesn’t mean the attacks will end. I can’t put your life at risk by staying here.”

“But—” she starts, but I shake my head to stop her.

“There’s nothing you can say that will change my mind. I will not stay here and put you in danger. When I get settled in a new place, I’ll arrange a meeting with Jerry Columbus to ask him to put a stop to this. He won’t like hearing that some of his crew is still working against him, so hopefully he’ll take care of it.”

Miranda shakes her head before saying, “I already called Jerry.”

“You what?!?” I half-shout at the woman, unable to believe my ears. I stare at her with wide eyes as my breath comes in short, quick pants.

“I called Jerry and explained what happened. Then I told him that he needs to get a better hold on his underlings,” she says as calmly as if she were telling me about having tea with her grandmother.

My head is shaking slowly back and forth as I struggle to absorb what she is saying. “No, you can’t just call Jerry. There are protocols that have to be followed.”

She shrugs her shoulders as if it were the simplest thing in the world to get the most powerful man in New York City on the phone. “I just kept demanding to speak to him, and I wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

It’s starting to sink into my thick skull that this brave, beautiful, and apparently crazy woman may have actually done this. I do my best to keep my voice from shaking when I ask, “Was he angry?”

“Oh, yeah,” she nods, obviously having no idea of Jerry’s true nature. “He sounded really pissed, especially when I told him that he obviously doesn’t have control over his organization.”

“Oh, Miranda, you didn’t.” My gaze lifts skyward as I run a hand along the back of my neck. The vivid blue sky doesn’t align with the frantic emotions that are taking over my system.

“You bet I did,” she answers firmly. “I reminded him that he’s alive because of you, and that he owes you.”

I can’t believe Jerry let anyone talk to him like this—especially a woman. He’s not known for his patience, and he tends to view females as being nothing more than playthings.

My mind is buzzing, trying to figure out how to protect Miranda from Jerry’s wrath when she continues, “I think he was ready to come unglued when I suggested that whoever is undermining his authority might make a tougher boss than he is. He definitely didn’t appreciate that.”

Blood pounds in my ears. I can’t believe she spoke to Jerry Columbus this disrespectfully. I’ve personally witnessed the cruel man’s retaliation against even the most minor perceived infractions. His response to Miranda questioning his authority is sure to be swift and severe.

Grabbing Miranda’s upper arm, I say, “We need to get you out of town. Now!”

The stubborn woman bears down on her heels, refusing to budge.

Gaping at her, I say, “Miranda, your life is in danger. We need to leave.”

She shakes her head as if I’m being preposterous. “Jerry was furious at first, but he calmed down after we talked a bit more. He even admitted that someone made an attempt on his life while he was on a superyacht in Hawaii.”

I’m surprised he would confide in her, like that. The last thing the vain man ever wants is to appear weak to anyone. My fear is that he overshared with her because he intends for her not to be alive long enough to tell the tale.

Not seeming to notice that fear for her safety has drained every drop of blood from my face, Miranda continues, “He plans to set up an elaborate trap to find out who is working against him, then he said he’d ‘take care of’ the problem.”

She makes air quotes with her fingers for the last bit, then leans in to say, “I think that means he’ll make them swim with the fishes.”

It might be funny, if it wasn’t so insane for us to be standing in the middle of the road casually discussing Jerry’s vengeful side, while Miranda’s life is in immediate danger.

Needing to make her understand, I take her hand to pull her toward my Jeep as I say, “We need to get out of here before he sends someone to make *you* swim with the fishes.”

“Jerry promised that you and I would not be harmed,” she says, still refusing to move.

I freeze and turn back to face her. “What do you mean he promised?”

“He promised that we would be safe,” she reiterates with wide eyes. Then she adds, “He gave me his word.”

For the first time, tentative hope begins to surge through my veins. “Did he actually say those words?”

“Yes, he guaranteed our protection from any harm, on his honor,” she answers.

Taking both of her cool hands within mine, I tell her, “Jerry lives by a strict code. His word of honor means everything to him. He won’t go against that.”

“Well, I told him he’d better make sure of it, or he’d have to deal with me,” she says in a serious tone.

The surprised laugh bursts from deep in my chest as relief washes over me. When it subsides, I say, “It was a dangerous, crazy thing for you to put yourself on the line like that for me. No one has ever done something that brave or dumb for me before.”

Her face scrunches up at the word ‘dumb,’ but it relaxes when I add, “You are the strongest, most courageous and wonderful person I’ve ever known, Miranda Wilson.”

She moves closer and beams up at me as she says, “You’re pretty great, too, Graham Timber.”

Needing to make sure she understands the gravity of what she did, I say in a solemn tone, “Promise me, you’ll never put yourself in that kind of danger again.”

“You know I fight fires for a living, right?” she quips.

“I know that, and I would never ask you to change careers for me—even though I’ll worry about you every time you go to work. What I mean is no more contacting dangerous mafia men for any reason. Agree?”

“Agree,” she says before tipping up to press her lips to mine.

Whistles and cheers arise from the fire truck behind us. I’d forgotten her crew was here witnessing this entire exchange.

We smile over at them before turning our attention back to each other.

“So, you’re staying in town?” Miranda asks with hope glimmering in her gaze.

Hugging her tight, I answer, “This place is my home. You’re my home, Miranda, and I’m never leaving you.”

We kiss and then grin over the catcalls from her crew.

“I’m so happy,” she murmurs for my ears only.

“Me too,” I agree quietly, before adding, “But we do have a couple of problems.”

She pulls back slightly to look up into my eyes, but remains firmly wrapped in my loving embrace.

Answering her unasked question, I say, “I don’t have a job or a place to live.”

In a confident tone, she tells me, “We’ll figure it out in the same way we’ll do everything from now on—together.”

EPILOGUE - MIRANDA

Thanks to my first on-the-job injury, I have discovered another of Graham's wonderful, lovable traits. He is the most tender caregiver in the world. He seems to have an innate sense of anything I may want and brings it to me before I even have a chance to ask.

When he delivers a steaming mug of chamomile tea and a plate with three Oreo cookies to me, I smile up at him and say, "I don't know what I ever did to deserve such an amazing man in my life, but I'm not going to question my astounding good fortune."

"You really gave me a scare," he says, with concern drawing his handsome features down as he sets the tea cup and cookie plate on the bedside table.

Downplaying what happened, I say, "I just got the wind knocked out of me. It's really no big deal."

When his expression remains somber, I try to lighten the mood by saying, "Besides, it only hurts when I breathe."

"Not funny," he whispers, but the corners of his lips turn upward. Shifting his attention to my lap, he says, "And you probably don't need this lazy lump weighing down on you."

"I like having him here. He's soft and warm," I assure Graham as I smile down at Nacho.

"I'm glad the two of you have bonded, but I think he may like you even more than me," Graham says as he adjusts the pillows behind my back before handing me the tea.

“We understand each other,” I say before blowing on the hot beverage and taking a tentative sip.

After Graham sets the mug back on the table for me, I rub the sweet tabby cat’s soft ears three times.

In response to the attention, Nacho kneads his claws into the fuzzy blanket on my lap three times, pauses, then adds three more. I have no idea if the cat understands my irrational desire for multiples of three or if it’s his own quirk, but he seems to always follow the same rule. It’s oddly reassuring.

“Are you sure you’re going to be up to going to my brother’s concert tomorrow evening? It’s no problem if you want me to call and tell him we can’t make it this time,” he offers.

Giving the thoughtful man a wide smile, I say, “I love it that you are so concerned about my wellbeing, but I am fine.”

At his uncertain expression I add, “I promise. Besides, isn’t this concert in Chicago the last time Gavin is going to perform his classic hits? We don’t want to miss that.”

“Yeah, it’s his last hurrah as a rock star with a big stadium show before he tones his music way down and switches exclusively to lowkey venues with less fanfare, so it’s sure to be a great show—if you’re positive that you’re up to it.”

His tone raises at the end, so I nod my head to confirm that I want to go. Giving him an ornery grin, I say, “Besides, I’m dying to meet this talented brother of yours. Is he as handsome in person?”

“Hey, now,” Graham murmurs as he leans in and playfully nuzzles my ear.

I giggle and say, “He may be a famous rock star, but I’m sure he’s nothing compared to you, my love.”

—

I can’t keep the excitement out of my tone as I tell the crew about last night’s concert. “Gavin dominates the stage. It’s really a sight to behold. And, then, when he announced that all of the proceeds from the show were going to rebuild

his brother's inn, the crowd went wild. It was absolutely electrifying."

Tucker holds his lower back as he stands back up from pulling weeds in a flower bed. "Graham, if I were you, I don't think I'd like the way her eyes light up when she's talking about your brother."

Graham grins over at me before saying, "I trust her."

Returning his smile, I say to Tucker, "Graham has *nothing* to worry about. I'm all his, in every way."

Tucker does a dramatic pretend gagging gesture that makes us all chuckle.

When Mrs. Swindell emerges from her modest home with a tray of lemonade glasses, we all take a break and greedily guzzle down the chilled beverage.

"It's really kind of you to help me out like this," the normally grumpy woman says.

"We're happy to be of assistance," Graham tells her as he sets his empty glass back on the tray and picks up the paintbrush that he's been using to touch up her front window's frame.

He doesn't mention that it was his idea to come clean up her yard and perform the minor outdoor repairs her house needs.

When I told my crew that the older woman had received a warning letter from her homeowners' association about the lack of maintenance and upkeep on her property, they all quickly volunteered to come help us with the work.

"Well, I appreciate it," Mrs. Swindell says before heading inside with the empty glasses. Proving that she's still as cantankerous as ever, she turns back and warns us in a stern tone, "Don't trample my flowers."

We aren't back to work for long when Graham's cell phone begins ringing. There is a definite smile in his tone when he answers, "Hi, Camille!"

Tucker raises his brows in my direction as Graham walks away to have some privacy for his call, but I shake my head to let Tucker know I'm not worried. Camille sounds like a pretty lady's name, and there is no denying Graham sounded happy to hear from her, but I have complete faith in my man.

After a few minutes, Graham returns. Without me having to prompt him, he says, "That was Camille, a childhood friend who grew up with us in our neighborhood. She lives in Indianapolis now, and she was hoping I'd be the bachelor of the month for a matchmaking group she belongs to."

Tipping his head to the side, he explains, "Actually, her first choice was Gavin, but she already knew from the internet that he's unavailable. So, she was going to settle for me, since I live fairly close to Indy."

His light chuckle doesn't sound at all bitter about being second choice to his famous brother.

For the first time, a bit of insecurity creeps in and threatens to devour me. Staring down at my work gloves, I squeeze the manual clippers I've been using to trim the overgrown hedges. *One-two-three... four-five-six... seven-eight-nine.*

Trying my best to keep my voice even and steady, I ask, "Are you going to do it?"

Graham immediately sidles right up behind me and wraps his arms around me. He hugs me tightly from behind as he murmurs near my ear, "Of course not. I'm taken."

The rumble of his words sends a delicious shiver down my spine. Unable to keep my curiosity at bay, I ask him in a quiet tone, "If we weren't together, is Camille someone you would date?"

"No, way," he answers immediately.

I turn to face him, so I can gauge his sincerity.

Seeing my questioning look, he adds, "I could never date Camille. She's too much of a drama magnet. In fact, the reason we hung up so abruptly from our call is because she had a pig at her door."

“A pig? You mean an actual, real pig?!?” I ask, almost certain that I must be misunderstanding.

“I think so,” he answers, shrugging his wide shoulders.

We share a chuckle at the mental image before I say, “Well, she sounds interesting.”

“That’s one word for it,” he agrees.

“My life isn’t nearly that exciting,” I admit, although I’m sure he has already noticed that.

“*Our* life is perfect because I get to be with you,” he whispers.

Delighted by his marvelous response, I tip up on my toes and press my lips to his.

Tucker walks by and grumbles in a droll tone, “Get a room.”

I squeal in surprise as Graham sweeps me into his arms and responds, “Great idea.”

The guys on my crew all pause the finishing touches on their work and turn to watch as the love of my life carries me to his Jeep and whisks me away into our happily ever after.



SUSTAINABLE CHRISTMAS TREE farmer Leo Sullivan is a passionate environmentalist, who is constantly at odds with golf course owner and careless stream polluter, Camille Ellis. When Leo’s pot-bellied pig, Charlotte, unexpectedly bonds with Camille, sparks fly in the spicy enemies-to-lovers romance, [*Indiana Idealist*](#). Tee up with Leo, Camille, and Charlotte’s story now!

—

See what all of the fuss is about when you join Indy’s favorite matchmaking group, [*The Man of the Month Club*](#). Get swept into the drama with an entire year of spicy romances that will leave you breathless!

INDIANA IDEALIST SNEAK PEEK - CAMILLE

I wasn't chosen as the best match for this month's bachelor—again. That's the tenth time in a row that I've been passed over for someone else. When this group started almost a year ago, I was convinced that the Man of the Month Club matchmaking meeting was going to be my ticket to everlasting love and happiness with my soulmate.

Each month, another happy couple is paired, and without fail, they magically fall in love.

At the beginning of the next month, I get all gussied up and sit at the table of hopeful women with my fingers crossed, but each time, someone else is selected as the best match for that month's bachelor.

I understand the concept of paying my dues and waiting my turn. Plus, I want to be paired with the man that will give me the best chance of being in a satisfying and enduring, long-term relationship. But this is starting to get ridiculous.

How is it possible that I'm no one's best match? Not to sound conceited, but I'm kind of a catch. I'm smart and successful. I can hold my own on the golf course with anyone. I make a mean dirty martini. I practice yoga three times a week. I have stylists who make sure my hair, makeup, and clothing are all on point. Oh, and I give one helluva blow job—not that anyone's stuck around long enough lately to find out about that particular skill.

It really doesn't make sense. It's not like I'm a bridge troll. In fact, I have a lot to offer. I'm not sure why no one seems to

be able to see that.

Deciding that I need to put some good karma out into the world, I call my childhood friend, Graham, and ask him to be the man of the month at our group's next meeting. There has never been anything more than friendship brewing between the two of us, so I know that we won't be paired, but I hope that bringing the handsome and charming small-town inn owner to the group for someone else will be the good deed that sets me on the path to finding my own true love.

Graham sounds happy to hear from me, but explains that he can't be this month's bachelor because he is madly in love with a badass female firefighter. I'm delighted by the happiness evident in my lifelong friend's tone.

He shocks me by asking, "Did you hear that my place burned to the ground?"

"What?!? No. Was anyone hurt? Are you okay? What can I do to help?" The questions rush out of me in a flurry as I struggle to process this horrific news.

Every time I've spoken to Graham since he moved to Illinois, he has told me about the work he puts into every detail of his quaint inn. That place was obviously his pride and joy. I can't believe it's gone.

I plop down on the sofa and stare at the plush carpet as I try to figure out what I can say to comfort my friend. He must be absolutely distraught.

Graham stuns me again by chuckling at my barrage of questions. *Yes, chuckling.*

The strange outburst makes me wonder if the fire has sent him over the edge. It can't be easy to stay sane when facing losing your home, business, and livelihood in one fell swoop.

"I appreciate your concern, but it will all work out," he says in a calm voice.

He's far too relaxed about this. Perhaps the full reality of the situation hasn't settled into his mind yet.

It hits me, then, what I can do to help him. “How about if I send you some cash to help tide you over until you get back on your feet?”

Money is the one thing I have plenty of that everyone can use in a time of crisis.

Graham sounds touched as he says, “That’s really sweet of you to offer, Camille, but I’m going to be fine. I have enough money saved to get by for a while, and Gavin is giving me the proceeds from last night’s concert to help me rebuild.”

“Oh, wow, that’s great,” I say. “I just wish there was something I could do to help.”

“No need,” Graham says jovially. “I have everything a man could want.”

I can tell by the delight in his tone that he is referencing his new love. It hits me, then, that this is exactly what I crave—the kind of love where you can lose everything and still feel like you have it all.

A scratching noise at my front door draws my attention. I can’t help but smile as I wonder if divine timing has delivered my true love to my doorstep.

Excited, I fling the door open wide. At first, I don’t see anything, but then my gaze travels downward.

I say into my phone, “I gotta go, Graham. There’s a pig at my door.”

He asks in a bewildered tone, “A pig?!?”

But I’m already punching the button to hang up and stooping to greet my unconventional visitor. The meticulously clean animal is obviously well cared for. She proves herself to be friendly by waddling forward and flopping over, silently demanding a belly rub.

Unable to resist, I scratch her soft belly. When I notice her red, bejeweled collar and nametag, I inspect it before saying, “Well, hello there, Charlotte.”

Mulling the cute name over in my mind, I mumble, “Charlotte... That was the spider, not the pig. What kind of a

moron names their pig Charlotte?”

As if in answer to my question, my environmentalist zealot neighbor, Leo Sullivan, comes stalking up my driveway.



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Illinois Innkeeper: States of Love


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