

Carrie Underwood "He Makes Me Feel So Special"

By EILEEN FINAN

Carrie Underwood was in for the surprise of her life. Her boyfriend, NHL star Mike Fisher, had been sneaking off with her cell phone to find her father's number. Her jeweler pal Johnathon Arndt was secretly creating a yellow diamond sparkler for the country star. Only one thing threatened to give Fisher's engagement plan away. "I could tell something was up because my mom was acting funny," says Underwood, 26. "But she stayed tight-lipped, which was amazing—growing up, I knew my Christmas presents long before Christmas."

Not this time: On Dec. 20, with her parents' blessing, Fisher, 29,

proposed to her in his hometown of Peterborough, Ont. And after keeping their relationship quiet for over a year, Underwood didn't bother to hide her joy. "I think you all know what Santa left under the tree for me this year: a fiancé!" she blogged. "Woo hoo! We all couldn't be happier!"

Like the bride-to-be herself, the moment Fisher popped the question was intensely private. "It was just the two of us," she says. Though she's choosing to keep the specific details of the proposal to herself ("I'd hate to ruin it by letting everyone in on it," she explains), Underwood reveals that she never dreamed about getting engaged as a girl. "The only thing I wanted was effort: 'This is how much I love you. Look at all the trouble I went through.'" And, she says happily, "I got that. I felt like we were the only two people in the whole entire world."

More often, she and Fisher are separated by the U.S. border. He's on the road half the year with the Ottawa Senators. And Underwood is about to embark on a four-month, 54-city headlining tour. "Leave it

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Still Glowing from Her Engagement, the Country Star Reveals Why She Fell for Her Canadian Beau—and How She'll Make Their Long-Distance Love Work on Tour



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to me to pick someone in another country to date—and marry!" she says. "But if it's worth it, you make it work, right?"

Opening herself up to love wasn't easy for the singer: She has said she successfully navigated her way from small-town life to superstardom by keeping her guard up around strangers. ("It's hard to find people who don't want something from you," she recently told *Esquire*.) When she met Fisher at one of her concerts in October 2008, she sensed this wasn't like her short-lived relationships with Dallas Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo and *Gossip Girl*'s Chace Crawford. "From the beginning it felt different," Underwood says. "You could tell Mike had the best intentions all the time." For his part, Fisher says, "The first thing that struck me was how shy she was, yet down-to-earth. I knew pretty early she was a special girl and I was very lucky!"

Drawn to his dark hair and blue eyes, Underwood also loved how "he looks at you when he talks to you. He's engaging and easy to be around." A big football fan, Underwood isn't as up to speed on the ice. "Mike enjoys my lack of hockey knowledge," she says. "If I told him who did what right and wrong after a game, he'd say, 'You sound like my coach.' I'm just supportive, and he's the same way."

The duo find romance in "the little things," like when she cleans his fridge and grocery shops for him or he makes her dinner and looks after her beloved rat terrier Ace. Or when Fisher shows her off to his friends ("It makes me feel really good," she says) or buys a purse he thinks she'll like ("He's always spot-on!"). "It's not grand romantic gestures," says Underwood. "We're really considerate of one another."

That support is strengthened by their deep Christian faith. "Our spiritual bond is something we try to put first in our lives," says Fisher. Adds Underwood, who was raised Baptist in Checotah, Okla.: "Mike has improved my walk with God. It's important to me, because down the road, I want someone who will help shape our kids into people who make the world a better place." Their shared beliefs helped the singer envision a future with Fisher. "Four months of dating is my 'This guy is starting to bug me' moment. That never happened. We just eased into 'I could do this forever.'"

Even after they say "I do," their love will remain long-distance. "We'll be little nomads for a while, until one of us retires," says Underwood. They plan to keep their homes in Nashville and Peterborough and will continue to stay close through iChat, texts and frequent calls. Underwood isn't worried. "Not being in the same room won't lessen our relationship," she says. "We completely have faith in each other." Adds Fisher: "We make the best of our time when we are together." And they dream about the day they'll start their own family. "Mike is amazing with children," says Underwood. "He's so going to be a better parent! I'm not bad with them, but I didn't grow up around children, and he had brothers and sisters his age."

For now, she's so busy, she's barely had time to plan her wedding (see box): Underwood just wrapped her first movie role in the Bethany Hamilton biopic *Soul Surfer* and is prepping for her tour. But she's deeply content. "Mike makes me feel so special," says Underwood. "I don't care what the title is: bride-to-be, girlfriend, bride. As long as I'm around him, I'm good."